Kathleen Brown-Noblet

Kudzu

LES PRESSES DU SAUDRAY

Kathleen Brown-Noblet is an American writer who grew up in Los Angeles and lived several years in Huntsville Alabama during the 1970's. Soon after, she was transplanted to France. She wrote her Ph.D. on the French theater figure and poet Antonin Artaud at the University of California, Los Angeles. While at U.C.L.A. she was selected to join Louise Glück's poetry workshop. She has published in small magazines, and is the author of two volumes of poetry, *Western Elegies* and *Letters to George,* as well as an anthology of short stories, *Clothes,* and the novel *The Confidante.* She is currently completing her third novel, *Gone: an extinction anxiety comedy.*

Kathleen Brown-Noblet

Kudzu

LESPRESSESDUSAUDRAY

LES PRESSES DU SAUDRAY

8 route de la Lande,
Le Saudray
22400 Hénansal
France

*

© 2025 by Kathleen Brown-Noblet

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of Les Presses du Saudray

ISBN 978-2-9572699-4-5

Cover photograph: Adobe Stock Photos

for Dr. William Daniel Calhoun

"We are scattered in time."

Saint Augustine*, The Confessions*

PART 1
Huntspatch

Chapter 1: 2011

And the Twickenham District house stood out among its Antebellum neighbors. It was three stories and an attic high. It had remarkable, intricate gingerbread details. It had bright gold window treatments and a worn asymmetrical façade.

Other homes in the district offered tourists strolling by perfect paint and perfect balance, broad porticos and smooth columns: they were temples to Southern living worthy of attention. They were temples to the past and they promised a coherent polish to the lives lived in them today. The polish that hopeful young people always expect of their futures. The polish that never maintains its luster.

This house, however, was not a temple to the past. No, far from it: it seemed to emerge from the past in an unbecoming way, a past that clung to it, like kudzu holding together a shack in the woods. You would think that the same family had lived in this house for six generations, stuck in that past, or maybe in a present that refused to move forward into the future.

And so, at a certain moment, as the sun rose, as the deep weathered porches of the Bell-Garth house gaped in sleep, the two second story windows, great amber eyes, shuddered in dreams. And then,

one golden roman blind slotted up, and then the other. Immediately, ceiling lamps from deep behind gave light, inviting passersby to wonder about the life within.

.*

Inside that house, Madison Bell-Garth drew her hair through a tortoise shell ponytail holder, clipped it shut and turned over *The Huntsville Times* to the back page. She took a swig of coffee. It was very hot. She reached, brisk and cheerful, for the orange juice to cool her palate and went back to her paper.

"Listen to this, Glen." She tapped her fingernail on the damask table cloth.

"Alabama's most celebrated political artist, Mikaela Bauer, has filled the back half of the Huntsville Space and Rocket Center Saturn V Lounge with what appears, from a distance, to be a mass of ivy covering the floors, the walls, the lighting and the heaters."

Glen said nothing.

"What do you think of that?" She looked up at her husband over the newspaper, but only saw the top of his curly brown head floating, as if disconnected from his body, above his green polo shirt. He was absorbed in his Blackberry.

She continued reading in a fading voice.

"A closer look shows the miniature city of Huntsville Alabama throughout its times, from the Rocket Center to the homes of the Twickenham district, and beyond to the woods of Madison County. Everything is clothed in shiny green leaves and translucent skinny stems with just a few strange purple flowers. If you look a little longer you will recognize the faces of people pressing out of the kudzu-covered walls. These are in fact one million sculptures of miniature leaves, made out of porcelain and hand-painted by skilled artisans from throughout the Great State of Alabama."

"Shall we go see that next Saturday?" she folded the newspaper onto the table.

"Kudzu gives me the creeps, Maddie." His thumbs were playing his Blackberry.

"Ok then." She grabbed her hat and sunglasses. "I'm outside"

*

Madison peeled the purple polka-dotted gloves off her hands.

"Message to self: order serious gardening tools."

She slapped the gloves on her jeans to get the dirt out of the ruffles and then took a bit of loam and rubbed it between her thumb and forefinger. Her ancestor had written somewhere that when buying a piece of property, he would walk into the woods, squat down, feel the dirt and smell it. The quality of the dirt determined the value of the land.

She had studied the structure of this soil in architecture school and ten years on, the specs still rattled through her head verbatim. Huntsville Alabama: *Very dark grayish brown to grayish brown when dry; silt loam; weak fine and medium sub angular blocky structure; friable; slightly acid; clear smooth boundary.* Huntsville was part of the Gray Lands. The famous red Alabama clay was way out north of town in the woods. And then east, farther east.

She reached into her back pocket for her I-Phone.

"Lost it. Here we go again. Kitchen garden plans. Ok—there. That's the one. Using string and pegs, divide the plot into quarters. No. Not yet. Back up a step or two. Dig up the whole site." Chester, her family's old gardener, had been given orders to turn the soil. It wasn't clear. Had he done that? He had sure raked the parcel so that it looked neat. "I don't even know enough to tell. I'm going to have to talk to him, make a checklist. Ok. What can I do here? Remove all weeds and the roots of any perennial species."

She looked at the tidy parcel with roots peeking out of the soil. Clearly, Chester had turned this soil.

"How can you tell if these are roots of perennial species? We will just say they all are."

She looked at her flimsy violet trowel and hand fork. These were house-warming presents from her Gran Lulu. Definitely not serious tools. Kneeling, she felt the soil again. There was something about it that engaged her attention in a way she had never expected. As if the earth itself were a person who called to her. Yes, she was ready to dig in.

As she settled into her work, fingering through the soil for the remains of weeds and lemongrass roots, digging and fiddling with her silly purple tools, she wondered about whether cilantro would grow well next to parsley, whether they would cross-fertilize. The thought flitted through her mind: Thank God we have no kudzu in town.

Before she could complete that thought, her trowel hit something a little strange — a little rough, but not hard. The bit exposed by the earth looked navy blue. She brushed it off and narrowed her eyes and looked at it. Was this some sort of undergirding to her garden? Some sort of gardener's trick? Then noticing a broad curve in the canvas, something else occurred to her.

She felt nauseated. She stood and turned towards the back porch.

"Glen!" she hollered in two rising syllables. There was no answer. She hollered again.

"What's with you?" Her husband squinted through the sunlight from the back porch.

"There is something buried in here. Oh my God. I think there's someone buried in here." She put her hand to her mouth.

"What the hell?"

He headed towards the patch of newly turned earth. He looked at the blue canvas, picked up the girlish trowel, and gently brushed off the Alabama clay.

"You're right, there's something in there. Go inside."

He heard the screen door slam shut, and began fiddling carefully around the edges of the big blue thing with a sort of miniature

purple hoe. He stopped a second, pulled in his chin and squinted. He hollered back towards the porch.

"Sweetie pie, if it's someone buried back here, he worked for the post office in the 1970's."

"What the hell does that mean?" said the young woman from the door.

"And he was poor enough to use rope for a belt."

"What?"

"It says U.S. Postal Service 1971 on it. It's a big fucking mail-bag. And whatever is in it is not a human being. It feels sort of like little paperback books. Sounds a little weird, but it feels like books."

"Why would anyone bury books?" She called out.

"Just come on out here and bring the real pick, Madison. And my hat. What are these fucking gloves?"

A minute later she walked down the steps with a fishing hat, an extra pair of gardener's gloves, a spade and a pick.

He smiled up at her, shaking his head.

"You are really excitable. Why do you always see everything as melodrama?"

She just looked at him.

"Well, this is going to destroy your pretty garden I'm afraid."

"Hmm."

"Give me my hat, would you?"

As they worked the bag out of the soil, it started pushing open and sun glinted from a mass of small Saran wrap covered packages. Plastic film had been wrapped around packets covered in tin foil.

Now Glen's first thought was that this looked like a sort of weird collection of cheeses. But was it some gourmet way of storing cheese underground, in the sweet cool earth? He saw in his mind's

eye similar images of cheeses packed away in underground caves in France. Maybe some chef lived here. But that was ridiculous. The previous owner of the house had been an absentee landlord, some sort of a real estate partnership. This place had been rented out to kids or interns at the local hospitals or students working for NASA or for the Redstone Arsenal for years.

"Get my phone, would you?"

"Use mine." She held her I-Phone out to him.

"Get my phone I said."

She arrived with his Blackberry and he spoke to her as he was typing in his password.

"I don't know what this is. Maybe some sort of ordnance. Or drugs. Or I don't know. A guy I met at a conference just became chief of police. I'm calling him personally. I don't think we want to open this alone."

*

The area was cordoned off by the Huntsville Police Department. The young couple had to watch the proceedings from their porch.

There was not one old postal bag but three. Dogs from the DEA came to sniff the stuff. Whatever it was, it wasn't drugs.

Men dressed in white jumpsuits came to inspect the bags more closely. But it wasn't ordnance either.

The afternoon wore on. There was a whole lot of waiting for this team or that, for this expert or that. People wandered into the house to use the toilet, have a glass of water, get out of the muggy heat. A balding detective asked the couple a few peculiar questions as a serious African American officer – a woman – looked on. The Bell-Garths said they knew nothing over and over again.

"You can come on down if you want to have a look Glen, Mrs. Bell-Garth." The Police chief, Bart Manville, waved them over.

They couldn't believe it: on the ground in front of them a hil-

lock of dollar bills wrapped in heavy tin foil and plastic wrap. The detective standing next to Manville said the bags contained maybe three hundred thousand dollars or more. In very old bills: ones, twos and fives. And two dirt specked silver bars.

Manville snapped his fingers towards the balding detective, who took a file out of the African American woman's hands

"I've got some documents for you to sign," he said. "Don't go anywhere."

Chapter 2: 1959

"Don't go anywhere. Y'all stay right where y'are." William Daniel Bell punched a button on the grey desk set and leaned back in his swivel chair, looking out the window of his office.

Naphtali Peterson stood, hands folded, hat on head, navy blue coat buttoned up to the neck, surprised how solid she felt. Her husband had said she didn't have a snowball's chance in hell of getting this job: *You are a Negro, Mrs. Peterson. Have you forgotten that?* Her two daughters had said *You go on girl!* And it didn't matter anymore. She'd done what she came to do, what any person ought to be able to do: step up and apply for a job she was qualified for. She looked out the window beyond at the tire treads in the driveway. It had been a wet week, and the red Alabama clay of Madison County emerged in stripes from beneath the gravel. What was a little sad was that she could see that she and Mr. Bell would have worked well together. No matter. In a minute she'd be out the door on her way home to start going through the classifieds again.

"Sit on down. Sit. Please. And take off your coat." He pantomimed taking a hat off his own head. "Your hat. You're in."

"Excuse me sir?"

He motioned for her to be quiet a second while he spoke into the telephone. She sat down and looked at him, and out of the corner of her eye she caught a glimpse of a black man in overalls hacking away at some kudzu across the parking lot.

"Send Kathy Anne back here would you? Thanks." He hung up. "Can you start today?"

There was a second of silence because Naphtali Peterson was so surprised.

"Well yessir."

"Good. You really want this job and all it entails?"

"Entails?"

"Involves."

"I know what the word means, but what do you mean Mr. Bell?"

He sat back in his worn oak swivel chair a second and then leaned forward across the desk.

"It's not illegal for me to hire you."

"Mm hmm." Mrs. Peterson sensed this was going somewhere she did not want to know about.

"I have another Negro working with me. Mr. Jefferson is in packing, you'll meet him."

"Mm hmm."

"But you are going to be the right hand of a white boss."

"Well, now, Mr. Bell, I applied for this position, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did. That was courage."

Naphtali loosened her scarf and looked straight at him. Bell would have liked to lay out his plans but this was obviously not the moment. Some sort of emotion was running high in this woman.

"I have been in your position Mrs. Peterson. More or less. One thousand years ago."

"Twenty years ago. And no… you haven't."

"Now don't go being dense on me Mrs. Patterson. You know pretty much what I mean. So. Here's the thing." Someone knocked on the door. "Kathy Anne, please wait at Bonnie's desk. I'll call for you. So, here's the thing Mrs. Patterson,"

"Peterson."

"Here's the thing. I am going to speak to you bluntly, because I want you to succeed here. And you will."

"Thank you."

"But you need to be fully aware. You will be viewed as a problem."

"It had occurred to me Mr. Bell." She felt the heat rise to her cheeks.

"A few people may leave the company because of their emotions."

Naphtali Peterson unbuttoned her coat and took off her gloves, looked at them and looked up at him from under her eyebrows, wondering to what she owed the honor of the position.

"Convictions," she said.

"Tribal emotions is more like it." Bell leveled at her. "I will see to it that my factory is not burned to the ground."

"Hmm." Naphtali had not registered before this moment the violence of her situation. She thought to herself right now that it was perfectly normal to apply for this job. But yeah, there was some sort of rage in her. Her eldest son's death flashed through her mind, his car spinning on its head on Drake Avenue.

"This means that you must be impeccable in every way, as you are today. Dressed, as you are today, as if you were the boss herself. And you must be impeccable in your service in every way too. And cordial. If I observe any misbehavior,"

"I will not misbehave Mr. Bell." What was he thinking? Maybe she would not be able to work with him after all.

"Not you, my people. If I observe any misbehavior, the slightest lack of respect, I will reprimand them. If something happens behind my back, and you can expect it will, just give them that sharp look and let go of it. If it gets out of hand, if it stops you from getting your work done, tell me." He opened the door and motioned to the secretary. "Miss Kathy Anne Myers, Mrs. Naphtali Patterson."

"Mrs. Peterson. Tally."

"Mrs. Peterson is my new personal assistant and accountant. I would like you to show her where to hang her things and give her a full set of keys. Then come get me and I'll take her around and introduce her."

"Ok. Um, Mr. Bell, Bert Jefferson told me to tell you that some kudzu had crawled onto the shed on the other side of packing."

"How'd it get that far? Tell him I said to get to it. He shouldn't need to ask me."

"He's doin' it. He just wanted me to inform you."

*

Bell felt immensely relieved. He had found his girl Friday and he understood her. Whether she got that or not was not important for the moment.

He thought about that interview again. There she was, this Naphtali Peterson of all names, and of course the first thing he asked her, while looking over her gloriously sparse résumé, was:

"Where'd you get that name?"

"Sir?"

"Is it African? Naphtali."

"Oh no, sir, Naphtali is in the Bible. It's one of the twelve tribes."

"Hmm. First time I remember hearing it. Is it your last name

then?"

"No sir. Peterson would be a very strange first name, don't you think?"

There was a silence. Mr. Bell just looked at her standing there. Naphtali Peterson grew uncomfortable. She thought maybe she had been a little sharp. She looked up from her hands and spoke.

"My mother was a bit pixilated. She heard my name in a list of begats when she was pregnant, and said to herself 'That is the most beautiful name I have ever heard. I will have a daughter and name her Naphtali!'" She looked at her hands again. "Pixilated."

"Pixilated. And the daughter of a pixilated woman has to be sensible."

"Hmm. Has to take care of things."

"Ok. Naphtali Patterson. I understand."

"Peterson. Tally."

Bell raised his eyebrows.

"Tally, ok. Tally."

"Because they always said I had an abnormal memory for numbers."

"Abnormal?" Mr. Bell was smiling now.

"That's what they say. Abnormal."

Chapter 3: 1908-1915

1911

Is it in my dreams, my long-limbed boy, that you were born counting the stars in the sky? You counted them out to me those very first seconds of life, still wet with blood on my breast, worried, exhausted and sad. I can see your barely open eyes even now, and I'm so sorry about all the difficulties. But we will be fine William Daniel. We will go through time together, we will rebuild things, we will cut away the kudzu, the knotweed that ties itself around everything, we will amass around us peace and stability. And we will be fine. Hush now, breathe well, sleep.

1908

William Daniel's mama, Maryse Crevecoeur, was a foreigner everywhere she went. She was a Bayou girl, but a stranger among the Cajuns. She was told all her life that she was not really a Cajun, but an Acadian, that she had roots in Normandy, in France. She was told that her ancestor wrote a great book, a book that she was given to read. It was a book about the lands and the peculiar peoples of the American continent, told by a man from another country, with

great compassion. Her family probably had read it at some time or other, but it was a distant part of their lives. Something they knew, something they owned. But for Maryse, this book was something that owned her, something that took over her thoughts from time to time with its beautiful rhythms, and with the names of so many towns she would never see: Nantucket, Philadelphia, Charlestown, Chattanooga.

One day she was sixteen, and her mother told her she had become a young woman. Her papa said it didn't look like she was getting married soon, so she needed to get a job.

Maryse moved to town to work in a laundry. She read her book when she could, and it made her thirsty to see all of the landscapes out east, up north, on the Atlantic coast, and in the great northwest. She worked a year and moved on.

Such is our progress, her ancestor wrote, *such is the march of the Europeans towards the interior parts of this continent.*

Throughout her teenage voyages through the kudzu-choked landscape of the deep south, throughout her moves into the interior parts of the continent, Maryse kept the book with her. In those years, she worked in people's homes and traveled and slept in boarding houses or in attics.

She was only moderately pretty, but she had a copper glow to her chestnut hair, and fine olive skin. Occasionally someone courted her. It made her uncomfortable.

In Nashville she met a boy named Marvin, a boy who liked to listen to her read. He had a high forehead and eyes the color of blue flame. Together they decided that they were like those outcasts searching the continent for something they yearned to understand.

Maryse fell pregnant.

1911

Marvin, just like a lot of other men from Tennessee and beyond — Kentucky, Georgia, Alabama, even Illinois — found work with

a certain Thomas W. Howell, a believer in something just this side of socialism that he called "Industrial Betterment." When Melvin and Maryse had arrived in Howelltown Tennessee she was expecting the baby any day. William Daniel would be born in their new home, with the help of the neighborhood women. His daddy called him Billy Dan.

In 1911, there were a lot of places that were working men like mules or like machines. But Mr. Howell and his managers were proud not to be exploiters of the human race, proud not to be under the illusion that there were scientific ways of getting maximum productivity out of human beings, proud indeed of their generosity.

TWH Forge was a place for human betterment. T.W.H. himself never let the workers forget that he provided identical clapboard rental housing for each family, all the houses neatly painted the same flint grey. But that's not all: they had latrines, running water (for kitchens), back yards (big enough for a kitchen garden), shops (owned by Mr. Howell) and sports facilities (empty lots) for workers. The good Mr. Howell even provided schooling for the children in the company chapel on weekdays.

1915

Almost four years old now, Billy Dan walked through the kitchen door and the strong smell of onions burned his eyes. He headed outside again. His mother pulled him back in.

"Tu vas où? Where are you going?" French sometimes just came out of her mouth.

"Just to the porch."

"You can wait for Daddy, but the gaslights are up, so don't you budge from this porch. Look at that beautiful twilight William Daniel. Entre chien et loup. Between the dog and the wolf, my mother used to say. Il faut compter les étoiles. See if you can count a hundred stars," his mama said.

"Can't see any stars yet."

"Yes you can. They're faint, but they come into focus when you look for them…"

It was pitch dark when Daddy came home, and the stars were ablaze. Already soup was in the pot on the table. The smells of chicken fat and onions and turnips and potatoes came forth one after the other, making William Daniel hungry and then sleepy as only very little boys can be hungry and sleepy at the same time.

After dinner and the washing up, his Mama and Daddy and he crawled into the big bed. His spot was near the window where he could see the wall next door and shadows against the curtains of the neighbor's window, like a Chinese puppet show.

His mother was reading an old copy of *The New York Times* to his Daddy. Marvin Bell did like to hear from the newspapers. He was addicted to the news as if he could do one thing to change it. He defended himself: "It's very American to think about politics." Once or twice a month, William Daniel's Mama would go into the company store and buy a rare copy of *The New York Times*. They would read what pages they had throughout the coming weeks until they could get the next one.

"*How strange a Chequer Work of Providence is the Life of Man,*" Marvin Bell yawned when Maryse finished reading the last article from the last page of the April 4th, 1915 issue.

"I guess I'll have to go by and see if another one has come in."

"We can see the talking machine when we go." Billy Dan was still wide awake.

"You need to go to sleep,'" his mother said.

"What's a talking machine?" His father rolled over on an elbow to ask.

"Mm. It's a thing that plays songs. It's got like a big horn on the side."

"Now you know how we feel when you ask all those questions," His dad chuckled.

"You know what it is Marvin. A Victrola."

"A Victrola. Right. Yep."

Tonight, like almost every night, his Mama would then adjust the oil lamp and read something from her ancestor's book, *Letters from an American Farmer*, out loud if all were awake and to herself if they were not.

When she read these stories, Billy Dan felt confident that he was learning all he needed to know to survive in the wilds. Living rough: adventure. He grew sleepy, and he could see himself far away, away from this dusty company town, confident about living with game and snakes, confident about building his own log cabin in the dense underbrush of the old times, purple and copper painted Mohawks and Cherokees never too far off, watching him as if they knew him personally.

Mama read and the little boy floated somewhere between sleep and wakefulness, all the while watching the shadows move behind the shades in the next-door neighbor's house. And so, as his mother read on, it was not his mind, but his imagination that tried to make the dancing forms correspond to the words his mother was reading. It didn't work very well; frustration teased his mind into activity.

"I view present Americans as the seed of future nations which will replenish this boundless continent."

"What does replenish mean?"

"It means fill up this place with something, with people, honey. Our ancestor lived at a time when there was practically nobody in the whole country."

"I mean I guess if you consider a few million Indians nobody." Marvin found himself jarred from his nodding sleep: he had some Cherokee and some Mohawk in him.

"Yes. But there were not really that many."

"Enough to give your sophisticated ancestor a few very difficult years."

"Daddy what does boundless mean?"

"What does what mean?"

"Boundless"

"Big and unlimited. Like the sky. Good word."

The shadow of his neighbor behind the curtain made a broad theatrical gesture. William Daniel knew that was a word he could use again: "boundless" was a gesture he could make himself. The school children would laugh when he said it, he knew that already. But it didn't matter: he never understood what made them laugh. Soon he would be four, and then another year and he would be five. And he slept.

*

William Daniel Bell stood at the door of the company town's chapel and shouted with all the other children inside:

"Thirty-six!"

The school mistress shot him an amused look. She turned back to the class.

"Six times"

"Forty-two!" The little boy at the door shouted all alone this time. The children in the classroom broke out in ripping laughter.

The teacher came up close to him and spoke quietly.

"Billy Dan Bell, three years old is too little to go to school."

"Just turned four."

"See? Too little. Next year you can come inside and have a chair at the table like everyone. Y'all go home to your mama. Skedaddle." And the door closed softly.

When that door closed softly on his nose, William Daniel Bell felt on the verge of tears. He didn't have a plan. He didn't have a plan. His daddy said you gotta have a plan.

School had been his plan. The porch creaked under his feet.

He saw Mrs. Slade's cat on the roof sunning itself. The kitty

looked like she was waving at him as she played with gnats in the sunlight. He headed that way, dragging one finger along the dusty window sill and looking up the gray dirt path between houses. On the rain barrel at the neighbor's house were some lengths of rope. They called to him and he came to look more closely. Knots. He could make knots. He and his Daddy made knots together. That could be a plan. Make some knots.

The cat jumped off the roof onto the barrel and sent the ropes flying. William Daniel again felt tears rise in his throat, and he wanted to see Daddy right now, up there at the glowing open hearth. He scrambled up the hill towards the forge. The back door was partly open on a vision of smoke and red-hot metal and enormous paper-moon-shaped machines and pyramids of stuff he couldn't identify.

He knew the working men well. He always asked them questions. They called him Billy Dan, like his Daddy did. Sometimes they would yell an answer over the rough sounds of the forge, sometimes they would laugh.

As Billy Dan stepped in and let his eyes focus, he felt someone grab his hand and he heard his Mama ring out with her musical Cajun French accent "William Daniel where have you been? I have been looking for you!"

"Out!" a voice came from within the forge.

"I apologize for William Daniel's adventurousness!"

The foreman shouted at her:

"Get that kid out of here!"

"Yessir. Yes sir. William Daniel!" she whispered to him. "You know better than coming in here!" She made him look her in the eye. "You could get yourself killed. Get other people killed wandering around a forge. Let's go. Time to eat and then maybe you need a nap."

"I don't want a nap."

After lunch, his Mama did not make him take his nap. Instead, she pulled up his suspenders and said very clearly:

"This is the plan: Stay away from the creek. Do not go back to the forge. Do not go anywhere the men are working. Go play with Mrs. Slade's kids."

He picked up his Daddy's compass and looked at the hands wiggle and settle.

"Do you hear me?"

"Yes Mama. I will stay away from the creek and the forge."

"And from the working men."

"And from the men at work."

"Go play with some kids. And be back before nightfall. Put that down." She nodded at the compass.

*

That night, as he and his Daddy and his Mama lay in bed, she read to them the story of an encounter between her ancestor and a Russian.

A lot of the words Maryse Bell read held mystery for William Daniel. Even words he knew were some nights spirited away from him by shadowy meanings. She read on:

"The Russians may in some respects be compared to you Americans. We likewise are a new people, new I mean in knowledge, arts and improvements."

Nothing in the slowing movements of the family next door floating now behind the shade corresponded to this astonishing sentence. Russians for William Daniel were ancient peoples dressed in bear skins, with impressive knotted cords hanging down the front of their robes. And the pictures in *The New York Times* showed cities that were magical, like plates full of weird fruit. Nothing in this Russian life seemed to need more beauty or improvement. He

looked at his Daddy, who was apparently sleeping now, and then at his mother. She was reading to herself, eyes lowered on the page.

"What are improvements?" he whispered.

His mother seemed surprised he was still awake.

"Well, William Daniel, at the time this was written, the Russian people were just beginning to move out of the Dark Ages."

He just looked at her.

"You don't know what that means do you punkin?" She said.

His father gave him a groggy pat on the head.

"Well, tiger, imagine there were no schools, no paper money, no tools, no books, no doctors. No forges. No water. Imagine there were no toilets." Marvin sounded like he was recounting a bad dream. "And that everyone had to dig potatoes for food and be a slave to the Kings and Queens and Princes. Terrible Kings and Queens and Princes. And there were terrible illnesses that killed so many people. And a lot of rats. That's the Dark Ages."

"Mm. And we don't have to live like that anymore." He still didn't really know what improvements were.

"No. We don't. Life keeps getting better," his Mama said, "That's evolution."

"There are still rats and potatoes" mumbled his sleeping dad.

"What's evolution?" asked Billy Dan.

"I'll tell you about that another time." His mama read on for him in a whisper now.

Chapter 4: 2011

As those men unpacked the mail bags to catalogue the contents, Madison Bell-Garth had floated above it, as if outside of time. She thought again about the smell of the dirt in her garden and the feel of the loam between her thumb and forefinger. She looked over their shoulders, and she was transfixed by the reddish-brown specks that dusted the silver bars. It jogged something recent in her memory, but she really didn't know what.

M. slept that night and dreamed that she was an old house, a house bigger than she knew, a house with ancient unused rooms, a house overgrown with kudzu, with a bright stiff light deep within.

She arrived sleek and dark and in a hurry at the offices of Bell-Garth-Woolson the next morning, and every person she passed turned to nod repentently, or stood almost at attention or looked earnestly down at their desks, making a show of getting back to work. Madison was used to it by now, the way people treated the CEO.

The only one who didn't behave strangely with her was her plump assistant, Trish. It was a relief to see her.

"Good Morning, Ms. Bell-Garth, no messages yet. You have an appointment at 9. With Mike. About the Grant building." Trish placed on the CEO's desk a little china plate with some sort of a large nugget of bread dusted with confectioners sugar. "Try this, it's heavenly. Beignets from Petteway's. Sounds like a pretentious name for a donut, but it is not a donut. You'll see."

"Oooh. Scrumptious. Wow. It's not really sweet." Madison paused just a second before she spoke again. "Trish, would you initiate a title search on my home address please? Go back a bit. Give me all the listings starting in about 1965. In fact, do a full chain of title would you?"

"Didn't you do this when you bought the property?"

Chapter 5: 1959

That Mrs. Naphtali Peterson was impressive went without saying. That she was gently friendly with every person she met in HHI was unexpected.

She went to work the minute she placed her hat on the rack and hung up her navy blue coat. William Daniel Bell watched her from a certain distance as they walked together through the premises of HH Industries. He introduced her to the engineers, draftsmen, assembly workers, packers and secretaries and there she was, pad in hand, asking names, taking notes. A couple of faces looked startled when they saw her. Bert Jefferson smiled a big smile. But for the most part, she elicited less obvious curiosity or hostility than Bell would have expected.

As soon as he arrived home that evening, he felt relief in his mind and his body.

At the same time, he noticed that his brain pounded with a desire to clear his property. Not that he was afraid of the Klan coming to set fire to the fir trees. Not because that single knot of kudzu had grown up the side of the stump way out back. Not only that, anyway. No. It was just time.

Kudzu had a way of jiggering something deep in Bell's soul: that was a fact. It was some sort of primeval fear that everyone along this swath of Alabama knew. The guy at the little grocery store on Drake Avenue said that the Japs in World-War II had sown kudzu throughout the cotton-growing south to destroy the American economy. More red-neck paranoia in a town that didn't know its own story. Didn't want to know it.

The following Saturday, William Daniel got to it. He made chocolate milk for his seven-year-old twins and told them to stay in the house because he was going to be working with the chainsaw. They wanted to watch. Of course, they did: they were quiet seven-year-olds, but they were seven years old. He said they would have to witness the felling of the trees from behind the sliding glass door.

The extension cords in the garage were a pile of knots. As Bell disentangled them, he suddenly felt his own Daddy's presence over his shoulder saying: Well that kind of looks like a slip knot, don't you think? And there's a double Carrick bend by God. In't funny how knots just make themselves in nature? You don't do a thing to a pile of strings and when you come back, it'd take a sailor to untie all that.

As he hauled the cords and the chainsaw out to the back of the property, he thought about the day he bought this land. He'd seen it towards sunset, and the bare ground was striped with the long shadows of trees from the adjoining woods. The architect who had built it had gone bankrupt, and now all the poor guy's hours of planning, his eye for the light, all his hard work would pass into someone else's hands.

Bell had bought this modern house for himself and his younger brother Georgy and his old Mama.

It was a place that butted up against the local forest. For his Mama, it was important to stay near the trees: she was too fragile to move completely out of the land she was familiar with. On one of her bad days, when Bell got back from work, Georgy would be

out there looking for her. She'd just up and wander away into the woods, mushroom hunting she said. But it wasn't that.

William Daniel pulled his safety earmuffs over his ears, pushed his glasses up his nose, had a look towards the boys at the sliding glass window, and surveyed the yard. He had clipped off the twigs and small branches and was ready to rumble.

All of those trees he had cleared out at 12 years old with Georgy and his Daddy – the year they tamed the kudzu and the year his Daddy died – all that had been much tougher than these firs and myrtles and tupelos. Clearing out the stumps would be some work for a man his age though. Maybe Georgy could come give him a hand.

His mind went back to that childhood job, clearing out the kudzu that was climbing over the back of the cabin. His Mama was so happy when they had finished with those vines. She fairly danced around in the light of her rickety old kitchen.

Now ***this*** house, it was a proper modern house: clean, solid, no humidity, and it had a fully installed kitchen. Bell had paid cash for it, no check: paper money on the table.

He looked back towards the patio and there were his boys behind the sliding glass doors, drinking their chocolate milk with straws. They waved to him. He nodded back. When he was their age, he was already hacking away at that kudzu, trying to protect the cabin.

The afternoon his wife Tamara saw the architect's house the first time, her face lit up. *Did you have them put in this covered—what would you call it? —a stone terrace? —in the front yard?* He could hear her clear voice in his head. *Why it just gives the illusion of being a porch, but it is not a porch at all.*

The chainsaw vibrated his whole body. He turned off the machine and breathed deeply; he felt the grief well up. That didn't happen to him very often anymore. She had died on that terrace, just fell over. Well, she'd been sick for a while.

When *she* first saw the house, Bell's Mama said "*C'est spécial. Odd, you know?*" It was too modern for her. She mourned the fact that there was no *real* porch. But he meant business about snake control. In Alabama you never completely eliminated them. Strays slithered into the bushes from time to time or tunneled under rocks. But he was firm: the Bells were not going to live the nightmare of hissing snake nests under their feet. And when Oran and Spencer were born, he thought of it many a time. No snakes, not with little boys around.

All the years she lived with him, every evening, his Mama would come out to her covered terrace and sit herself down in the porch swing. She'd watch him roll slowly up in his automobile, up that long driveway that headed towards the woods. He and Georgy eventually built an independent garage with their own hands just beyond the end of that drive. He set up a workshop, and the first time he got his hands on a gold ingot he celebrated by buying a small old-fashioned bank safe and bolting it to the concrete floor. It stayed in place even after 1955, when he had a more sophisticated vault installed.

As he ran the branches through the wood chipper, William Daniel Bell thought about Mrs. Naphtali Peterson again and about how relieved he was to have found her. She would free him to focus more on new business and less on correcting accounting errors and handling quibbles among the team. She had real character. She had said to call her 'Tally'. He couldn't imagine how anyone would have the nerve to call Mrs. Naphtali Peterson 'Tally'. Nope. Wasn't going to happen.

That conversation with her… what he said… that was almost word for word what old man Hunt had said to him when he was a kid taking over the shipping department. Except for the Negro part. It was much more dangerous for her than it had been for him. What was some old guy going to do, try to beat up an 18-year-old country boy because he was promoted too young?

Among the last branches of one of his trees he found kudzu wound tight around all the tender shoots. Gates of hell! He said it out loud.

'Huntspatch', — as the natives started calling the town a few years back — was surrounded by an encroaching jungle of kudzu, a miracle plant providing cheap forage for farm animals. The stuff had arrived eighty-one years before WWII, part of the Confederacy's efforts to shore up its economy during the Civil War.

In fact, it was a beautiful vine. It just dominated every grove and thicket it entered. The color was close enough to the green of the local forests that no one would notice it until it completely covered the trees — the woodlands emerging as processions of hostages being led to a sinister demise.

At the end of that long day, when the twins were in bed, when everything was quiet, William Daniel Bell picked up his book, grabbed a beer from the fridge, and went to sit on the terrace that was supposed to replace his Mama's beloved porch. He looked intently at the far woods, and saw the kudzu turning an abandoned barn into history.

He turned to the first page of his book: *Gold and the Dollar Crisis.*

Chapter 6: 1916-1917

The dollar crisis in Thomas W Howell's company town, everyone knew about it. The British and the Irish were draining dollars from the U.S. to pay for the Great War. TWH residents lived almost entirely on company script. But Maryse Bell, William Daniel's mama, only wanted greenbacks.

After lunch, on the porch in front of their home, she'd lay a flat board on top of the rain barrel, set out her ink bottle and her pen and that meant she was open for business. She'd sit down on her rocking chair and begin darning socks and repairing clothes in the afternoon light. Waiting, the town scribe. She was so pretty sitting there, it calmed William Daniel's soul in a way his soul would never be calm again. She looked up with a bright eye as things happened around them and then turned back to her work, hands always moving in the flow.

From time to time, one of the ladies from nearby or farther away would come and ask for her help. It was paying work you know, but who knew how the work would get paid? Not in TWH script: anything but. A peach pie. 2 bottles of molasses. Some dried-out ink. A book. Coins and dollar bills, that was what his Mama gently pushed for.

Now it wasn't that no one knew how to read and write in 'Saint Thomas's Company Town'. Some of them didn't but a lot of them did. But maybe they were worried about saying the right thing in the right way so that the county clerk would send them their birth registry papers or what-have-you. Or else they were in some sort of a state; they were so damned angry that thoughts and mean imaginings were just crashing around in their heads. They couldn't start writing and still make sense.

So they'd come barreling up the steps, skirts held in their fists, heels clicking, tongues clucking and then just stand there in front of Maryse Bell not quite sure where to start.

"Good afternoon Dorothy. Glad to see you. My hands are beginning to cramp up here."

"Good afternoon Marriss (They never *could* pronounce her name right). I was wondering if you could give me a hand with a letter to my brother. I'm spitting mad."

"Is that right? Well sure. What do you want to say?"

And then his mother would spend half an hour disentangling their thoughts with them and another ten minutes putting it down on paper in her clear gentle hand.

When the spitting barreling Dorothy Slade or whoever was out of earshot, she would say to Billy Dan:

"Less time than it takes to bake a peach pie William Daniel, and a lot more interesting."

And Mama would pick up socks to work on them again. She was pregnant again, and tired.

Her writing did not only bring in peach pies, it also brought in a continual flow of little bits of US currency. And this she stored, as people did in those days, in pouches and socks inside her mattress. Mr. Marvin Bell knew about it of course. It was his plan that one day they would get out of there and open a dry goods store in Chattanooga. Their plan fell through.

Thank God they saved that money, though; because that money is what saved the family. Maryse was soon to give birth to baby Georgy.

The writing saved them too in a way. Dorothy — who had exchanged many angry and then conciliatory letters with her brother — was able to do the Bells a very big favor when Billy Dan's Daddy was sent off to the war in Europe. Because you know, they had to leave 'Saint Thomas's Company Town'. They weren't the only ones of course. But the other families had some place to send the wives and children. The Bell family did not.

Luckily angry old Dorothy Slade had family that owned a large patch of land in Madison County Alabama. It had a big old place on it from before the civil war and a cabin as well. Her brother had inherited it and Dorothy had inherited nothing but a coin silver spoon and two pretty tablecloths.

The big old place burned down in 1916 and instead of rebuilding it, her brother's family decided to move to a house in the Twickenham district of Huntsville. Where they got the money to do that no one knew, because they were behind on their taxes.

Now Dorothy and her brother had been on good terms for a year thanks to Maryse Bell's letters. So Dorothy decided to ask that favor. Maybe William Daniel and the baby that was due to come and his Mama could go live there in that cabin for a year or so in exchange for keeping an eye on what was left of the property, taking care of the chickens and goat and the abandoned cat that apparently remained on the premises. That way her brother did not need to ride out every morning and evening to move the chickens in and out of the hutch and make sure the goat was brought back in.

When the answer was yes, William Daniel's Mama was relieved and started calculating everything she would need to do before they went to Madison County. Her plans materialized in the folding and stacking of clothes and linen everywhere: his stacks, her stacks, baby's stacks, Daddy's stacks. Then stacks of other sorts of objects appeared. The change in her started. She was saying everything twice.

"Tools are here near the door and utensils are on the kitchen table. Don't move them. Utensils are on the table in the kitchen and tools are near the door. Do not touch!"

Moving piles, refining organization: there wasn't that much, but they didn't have much room, so it got crowded.

Marvin Bell was still around at that point. He was a darkened version of his earlier self though. Everything had gone quiet in him. And William Daniel's Mama couldn't look straight at him anymore, even when she was giving him some basic French lessons for France. So Billy Dan made his Daddy look him in the eye:

"Look at me Daddy. Say it like this…"

The French was much better when he did. But the little boy would then partake of the fear and sadness that had darkened his Papa's soul.

A month after Marvin had been shipped out to Europe, baby Georgy was born, and a month after that, William Daniel's Mama decided to pack them onto the wagon for the voyage to Madison County, Alabama.

The young boy's job was to tie everything down with knots. He had learned how to tie knots at his Daddy's knee. Learned to tie knots that no force from any direction could untie. It took a careful human mind and nimble fiddling to untie those knots. That was how they spent their Sunday mornings. His Daddy would show him, and he would do it right every time. "Did you see that Maryse?" His Daddy would laugh out loud. "That's the smartest baby anyone ever has seen."

Billy Dan was almost seven at the time of the move, and was a strong and wiry kid. He tied together each stack of clothes and linen with different knots for the fun of it. Constrictor knots, bowline knots, crossing knots, cat's paws, lark's heads, even nooses. For the big packages like the mattress, the most beautiful knot of all, the double Carrick bend. They were ready to go get on that Ferry in Chattanooga.

"How the heck are we going to untie all these knots William Daniel? How will we get them undone?" Maryse was suddenly tired and anxious. Baby Georgy was twisting in her arms as if he were trying to get away.

"Don't worry. If I can tie it, I can untie it."

Chapter 7: 2011 HPD

It was untied again, dammit. Police chief Bart Manville hitched his foot up on a fire hydrant to take care of his shoelace for the third time this morning.

This place. Everything was untied. The best place to live in the United States someone had said. He had been looking for a job after his divorce. Best place in the world, they said. How could that be? It was in the middle of nowhere. It wasn't particularly pretty. It would take twelve hours to get to the ocean from here. It was humid, my Lord was it humid. And then, when it didn't rain enough in Huntsville for a couple of weeks, you got the impression that dried silt released a powder of ashen soil into every low and trivial breeze. Manville had seen two dust devils that morning on the construction site across from his house. And there it was again, downtown, the powder on the sidewalk. How could anyone breathe in this town.

Vibrant, brilliant town, the journalists said. But from what Manville could see, Huntsville was a sociological grotesque: it was red necks, poor white trash and remnants of the KKK. It was black poverty giving birth to a determined black middle class, and 25 arty farty musicians. It was scientific superstars without a job, it

was the golden remains of the imperial south with no plantations. And it was courtiers and court jesters of all sorts: stockbrokers parachuted in from Chicago, Lawyers from New York, husbands and wives of NASA staff who in L.A. or Boston or D.C. would have been considered highly successful. Here in this big village, they had a hard time finding a place for themselves.

In another country, in another era, all of these strands of hierarchy would have sedimented into something complex, but stable. Not here. This Huntsville, this weirdly military and elite town in the geopolitical mess of 2011 was two centuries too young to have found a permanent identity.

A year ago, before Manville became chief of the Huntsville Police Department, a celebrated murder case summed up the place beautifully. A frustrated Ivy League professor, a woman who felt she was not properly appreciated, shot up her tenure committee. It turned out she had a deep history of violence, but even so... In what other hick town in America could a brainiac go to a cocktail party and feel so stupid she wanted to kill everyone in the room?

A sprinkler went on and Manville jumped out of the way. Detective Penn bumped him as he loped past, wiping a few drops off of the top of his own balding head.

"Hey Chief," he sang out taking the steps two at a time. "Gotta go. I'm late. Training a girl with an attitude." The great doors closed behind him.

Manville was reminded that his own team was untied. They all functioned as if unrelated to one another. And none of them seemed to notice there was a problem with that. Maybe the new girl did: she was unusual, that woman with the African name who Penn was headed inside to train. Maybe she noticed. She might be a good element.

A good element like Penn actually. It was hard as hell to know what to do with him though. The guy was alternately a smart-ass and silent. Manville's predecessor said he was an arrogant son-of-

a-bitch, but a hell of an investigator, a penetrating interrogator, and always on time. He got along fine with the rank and file, negotiating his relationships with stupid jokes and donuts on Monday mornings. But he turned a cold eye on the local aristocracy: wives and husbands of NASA scientists, the wealthy families of the old south, politicians parachuted into Huntsville from B'ham. The fact was, he didn't fit in with anybody. He fooled the rank and file, which was obviously better than getting in fist fights with them, but it wasn't good enough. This team needed to learn how to depend on one another. To function as a unit.

*

Waiting for the coffee to drip in the HPD staff room, Eugene Penn just stared at the wall. It occurred to him that he couldn't name the colour of that wall. Was it a very pale bile green? Or a dusty vomit beige? Or just dirty white? He looked away and a blotch of pink followed everywhere he looked. He grabbed his coffee. Yeah, it was greenish then.

He glanced through the glass separation into the open-space office, where a wiry African American woman with an incredibly complicated braided coif waited, filling out documents on her computer. She looked up at him. She had bright eyes.

She looked up at him. Bertine Kobehi had been wondering since she joined the team here: what sort of trouble was Detective Eugene Penn going to be? Sturdy trouble, that's what came to mind. Not a stupid bone in his body. He was a very careful man. Not a redneck, though sometimes he pretended to be. Was that any better than being one? Well, he was sturdy and some sort of a problem. She kept her sigh un-uttered. She had things to learn from him; she was going to be spending rather a lot of time with this guy, especially on this postal bag case. She'd just have to manage him.

She'd just have to manage him like she'd had to manage every other white person in her life, every time she walked out the door of her apartment. She calibrated that this one would require more management than the guy at the 7-11, who she just needed to avoid

crossing glances with. More management than her bank manager, who was oily and tempted to make offensive remarks, but who came around when he saw the numbers connected to her accounts. More management than Sergeant Ewell Clardy, who responded well to a shaking head and raised eyebrows. But why was this one going to be so much more complicated? That's what she wondered.

Detective Eugene Penn, for his part, always thought two things when he looked at Ms Bertine Kobehi, and he thought them one at a time and very quickly: one, how the hell did she do that to her hair? And two, she had this look on her face like she secretly knew his inner workings. He couldn't decide if this was irritating or not.

Penn sat down across from her and slipped on latex gloves.

He picked up one of the piles of tinfoil-wrapped bills she had signed out of evidence this morning. Two useable fingerprints had been found on the foil, one on the tape. No match in the system. He looked at the copy of the print. It was a small hand. A woman? Then there had been a couple of hairs. They were there, in a plastic bag, one curly blond, one straight and black.

"So this stuff was buried in the God damned fucking ground dead in the middle of Huntspatch." He drawled for fun when he said it.

"Do yourself a favor and don't use the name of the Lord as a profanity. You will not like what comes your way," Sergeant Bertine Kobehi whispered to him over the top of her coffee cup.

A faint doubt about whether that was a joke flickered across Penn's face.

"Why was it buried in the God damned fucking ground?" He carefully opened the pile and started counting: "One two three four…one for me!" Penn mimed stuffing the bill in his pocket. He held it up to the light.

"It was put in the ground to hide it." Sergeant Kobehi tucked a braid into the back of her coif. "Should I be taking notes?"

Eugene Penn laughed silently as he was looking at the crisp two-dollar bill in his hand.

“Where’d the bill go, Eugene.” She was apparently serious.

He just liked the music in her voice. It made him laugh. She made him laugh.

“Nothing up my sleeve, nothing in my pockets.” He leaned back in his chair and turned them inside out. “Who the hell would know anyway?” he said to the peanut gallery. “Some of these bills are rotted.” Penn stuck a post-it note on the pile of two dollar notes. “Chief, do we have to keep the rotted ones?” He shouted out. He took another bill and inspected it, running his finger over a rough edge.

“Give it a break Detective. Sergeant Kobehi doesn’t know you.” The answer came from an adjoining room.

“Neither do you, chief!” Eugene held the bill up to the light again.

“What are you looking at Detective Penn?” Kobehi asked.

“They say there is a secret message written in the trees.”

“That’s an urban legend.” She did not know what was with this guy. Was everything a middle school joke?

Eugene looked up: yep, she was just out of financial investigator school, whatever that was.

“Well, thank you very much for that information, Mrs. Kobehi."

"Ms."

"Ms. affirmative action girl,” Ewell Clardy popped.

“Don’t ***fucking*** call me that.” And now she was dead serious.

Penn just couldn’t make her out. Her personality trembled before his eyes and confused the hell out of him. One second, sweet and not exactly naïve, but tucked in very nicely, thank you: the Christian girl. The next second, she was dangerous and sharp and cool, and through it all, looking at him like she knew him.

“What the hell y’all doin’ Penn?” Freckle-faced Sergeant Ewell Clardy stood up from his desk, sauntered over and grabbed at the bill Penn held up to the light. It was swiped away just in time.

“Ok, Sergeant Kobehi, come here and have a look at this,” the detective said. “Yes, this is money, but it’s also physical evidence.”

She pulled up a chair and squinted at it.

“Counting the moolah is not enough."

"Well, jeez thanks." Bertine raised her eyebrows.

"Look at the bills closely; see if they talk to you.”

“Is it counterfeit?” Clardy moved in too close to Bertine and she swatted him without turning around.

“No. Get out of here Clardy.” Penn snapped. “This one, Sergeant, … It’s almost as if there is a trace of writing on top of the bank note. As if someone put a piece of paper half on and half off the top of the bill and then wrote something on the paper. You see what I mean?”

“Just faintly.” Sergeant Kobehi said.

"Well, we are going to take a couple of photos of it and pull it up on photoshop to see if we can make some words appear."

"How do you do that?" She focused tightly on that bill.

The new chief called out from his desk:

“Has anyone been here for 40 years?”

“The guys in this unit in 1971 all killed each other off, Chief,” Eugene Penn shouted back.

The chief walked into the room, slipped on some gloves, picked up Penn’s package, and carefully started inspecting the bills in the light himself.

“Anyone been here for forty years, I said.”

A voice came from the depths of somewhere.

"Sorry. Thought you were joking. Don't think so."

"Why would I be joking?"

"Colleen has been here for 40 years I think." It was another voice coming from another room.

"My secretary? Is that right? Someone run upstairs and get her, would you?"

"She left for a doctor's appointment." Bertine grabbed her cell. "You want me to call her?"

"No. It can wait. The most recent bills here are from the late 1960's, but they seem brand new," Manville said.

"Most of them do. And that's what's interesting." Penn responded.

"This money has never been in circulation. A bank heist?" Kobehi squinted.

"That's 50 years. What is the big deal chief?" Ewell Clardy whined.

Eugene looked at the time on his smartphone and spoke to the screen.

"Okay, we found some bags of money, we'll find the owner. No biggie."

"They're probably dead anyway. They haven't missed it since …whenever… And if they stole it, the statute of limitations is up." Clardy said.

"Depends on how they acquired it," Bertine said. And as if she were a ghost, as if her voice did not make sound waves travel, the boys around her continued their conversation.

"and $300,000 is barely enough to pay all the lawyers when the family starts duking it out over who owns the loot" Penn laughed to himself.

"Yeah, Eugene" Bertine was a bit irritated. He shot her a look.

“Detective Penn. But at 500% inflation over 40 years it’s more like two million dollars.”

“Well a bit less than two million. And you have not taken into account what it would have been worth if the money had been put to work. That could be a phenomenal amount. But if they cash it in for current bills at the bank, it will still be $300,000 won’t it?” Eugene Penn looked at her again. “So let’s keep it simple in the Po-lice Department,” He winked.

“Keep it simple in the Po-lice Department... for now anyway.” The new station chief patted her on the shoulder.

It didn’t break her concentration: this time it was her turn to treat them like ghosts.

“And we don’t know what other crime it might be connected to.” She drew the words out nice and slowly. “And if it was acquired by misleading the owner there is no statute of limitations in the great state of Alabama.”

“She’s got a head for figures and a head on her shoulders, what do y’all think? That’s why we hired her.” Chief Manville said.

“That’s condescending.” Bertine Kobehi’s voice was flat. After a second she continued “You guys are aware that you don’t need great mind for mathematics to work here… You know that, right?”

“How the he-ell can I train some over-confident black woman with no sense of humor?” Eugene drawled.

“Who brought in this affirmative action girl anyway?” Someone from across the room chucked this as if it couldn't possibly be offensive.

“Let’s see, shall I sue?” Bertine was calling out to whoever was listening.

"Okay!" Detective Corrie Stein called. "A bright and competent woman shows up and the fat boys on the playground have to cut her down to size. Welcome to Alabama."

“Stick a buttermilk donut in your mouth and shut up, Detec-

tive." Manville was relieved to be saying it to her and not one of the boys. He had seen fistfights break out for less.

"Why don't you come to church with me this Sunday Eugene?" Bertine looked closely at a bill on her desk, and Eugene's eyes opened wide with laughter. "We'll pray for you, take care of that little teeny tiny skinny Klan strain in your mind. Bring you back into God's community."

"Jesus! Make one joke and you people think we are Klan." Eugene shook his head. "Isn't it illegal or something to talk about God at work? Separation of Church and State or something? Maybe I'll sue too."

"Bertine, keep your eye on the ball, do your good work here, and speak the good word on your time off would you?"

Chief Manville watched his new recruit walk away and sighed a deep sigh. He should have called her Sergeant Kobehi. He really was going to have to pull all these people into a room one of these days for a serious talk. He didn't like psychology or coaching sessions or team workshops, but this was about to spin off into chaos. It was like running a department filled with eight-year-olds.

And this was his promotion.

Chapter 8: 1961

Police Raid at The Yardbird !

By Joanne Tanner

Huntsville, June 20, 1961

The Huntsville Police Department swooped down on the Yardbird after-hours jazz club on its opening night yesterday. The club, at 3161 Grant in the Northeast, was named after the famous Negro saxophonist Charlie "Yardbird" Parker who came to play in Huntsville 14 years ago. Several musicians were arrested, including mixed couples from the jazz world and Huntsville's own singing sensations Louella James and Sonny Fitz. Everyone present was packed into paddy-wagons and spent the night in the holding tank.

Club owner Bobby Neals alleges that the arrests were made because of the racially mixed nature of the establishment. He had hired private security from out of state because he received threats from the Decatur faction of the Knights of the KKK.

The Police chief, Wally MacPherson, has denied the allegations. "White women consorting with Negros is their own ugly business. We shut them down because this John Coltrane guy is a known heroin addict. So we're going to just nip this in the bud. There will be no 'hell hole' in Madison County."

This morning at 9 a.m. a salt and pepper stream of tired people in evening clothes left the Madison County Jail. Interviewed as he left, local musician Matt Penn, a stocky man with tufts of red hair around his balding head, said "It's a private club. No one had any damn drugs or reefers or anything like it. We brought our own alcohol. Is it illegal to drink now?" Speaking about the police, the man said "I think they're Klan. In fact I know at least one of them is Klan." The woman on his arm said "Oh come on Matt. Leave it alone."

During the raid, the names of 102 club members were also seized. The official reason for the arrest was selling and buying liquor after hours. Charges have been dropped because the club did not sell drinks.

George Bell ducked and turned his shoulder as he entered the back rooms of the Yardbird. He was used to moving like this, and he did it with a big man's grace. Thinking about what the hell he was going to do if there was a problem with Sherry and the baby, he cringed at the idea that he was not as good at solving problems as his brother. He was not a brain but dammit but he was not a big dope either. He turned his shoulder and turned away from the idea. How important was that anyway? He had more than he had ever expected: a solid business, now his Sherry, and soon he'd be a father. His big brother Billy Dan was alone again at almost 50. That's where brains get you. Well, he had the twins.

Georgy thought about Sherry again: how was she going to make it through childbirth with that hip of hers? Billy Dan guessed she'd be fine with the modern medicine and all, but guessing wasn't feeling too good to George Bell right now. He had to make plans if the operation really crippled her.

George moved politely through the press of people at the Yardbird that Friday night, smiling a controlled smile and keeping his eye above the press. He was looking for his girl. Sherry was a half Cherokee girl with mousy brown hair, a bad hip, and one leg shorter than the other. But you knew, in Huntsville, not to make the slightest reference to this physical fact, because if you were from Huntsville you had heard about the mythical scene in the Main

Street Bar the night George and Sherry met. Sherry was a bit slow taking care of customers, but she was always nice, always nice and never pausing in her work. Georgy had just come into the bar that hot evening and seen her there doing her work, wiping down the counter, serving up the beers, ringing out the cash register and keeping those peanut bowls filled. And he liked her; he just damn well liked her. She looked up at him and smiled.

"What'll y'all have?" She asked.

"What's good?"

"Draft's always good. It's cold."

"I'll have a draft. What's your name?"

"Sherry."

Now at about that time, some sorry-ass started whining "Where's my goddam peanuts gimp girl?"

Georgy turned slowly around to look at the drunken fool.

"What did you say?"

And man, a fool was what he was.

"I said I wanted the cripple to get me my damned peanuts."

"Well now we're about to see who's going to be a cripple."

"No that's all right that's all right," said Sherry. "People do this all the time." She was saying it when the fool's head hit the bar.

"They may well, but right now, while he still has his teeth, this particular inebriated gentleman is going to apologize to you."

And that was the beginning of their romance. So when Georgy was heading through the crowd, the Huntspatch natives stepped aside and let him pass.

Still, the waters did not exactly part before him: everyone didn't know who he was. In fact, a lot of the folks at the Yardbird that night were not from Huntspatch. There were black musicians and white college students. There were a few reporters and a couple

of thugs. There were even a few rich looking folks from Atlanta. George didn't hear what they were all talking about because he wasn't really listening, but he did feel what Sherry called 'political electricity'. She liked that. And there she was, right in the middle of it.

Musicians were gathered around her and a kind of a flashy young gal. And musicians there were. Lots of 'em. Sherry was not a musician. She had told him about her friend Lulu, who was a singer. Maybe that was the lady with the bright red lips. Sherry was so pretty, he thought, just a natural girl who liked to listen to things, the damnedest things.

George didn't care a whit for music. He was a mechanic. As he looked at Sherry there in the press of musicians with the painted lady and Naphtali Peterson, he was sure this wasn't the place for her. There were too many movements in the room, sudden shifts of the crowds, explosions of laughter, cigarette smoke. Maybe even some flu stuff.

"Hi honey, hey Mrs. Peterson."

"Hello George." Naphtali Peterson seemed particularly happy tonight.

"Hey punkin." Sherry just did something weird to him every time she spoke

He leaned over to kiss her near her ear and whispered, "Who's the lipstick?"

"Honey, you don't know my friend Louella James yet. She sings with the band. Lulu, Georgy. Georgy, Lulu."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance Ma'am."

"Lulu, dear. Call me Lulu."

"Ok, Lulu. Nice to see y'all. Let's get a table Sherry. Let's get you off your feet and out of this mess. Can we order some dinner?"

Sherry laughed.

"Well bless your heart! Haven't you eaten? No dinner, no. I brought a quart of beer. They'll have some bits and pieces to eat."

When they got a seat, they were clearly the first people to be sitting around the stage. From where they were, they watched the small gatherings of people in the room, the lights slowly dimming, and then spotlights moving among groups as if inviting them to sit down.

And people began to disperse to their seats. Bottles of beer popped open, peanuts were passed around, and everyone had their eyes on the stage, where one at a time, the famous jazz musicians started to slip into their chairs, set up their instruments, blow on them, tweak them, pluck them. A bright kudzu-green light swelled on the stage, and then the room went suddenly black. The audience was perched there waiting for the explosion of jazz to start the evening on its way. But the explosion they heard instead was the shouting of police voices, and all the lights in the club went up. The musicians looked astonished on the stage and then everyone started running. George held Sherry in her seat and said, "Do not move, you'll get hurt. Let them do what they are going to do. I'm here. Don't move. We'll just let all these snakes slither out of here."

Chapter 9: 1917

Living with snakes

Three mornings in a row, as the little Bell family made their way from Chattanooga to Madison County, the sun swelled a brownish-yellow on a dark blue horizon. William Daniel couldn't tell what time it was, but it was early. Was his daddy, in France now, looking at the sunrise too?

Three nights, the sun set in unimaginably bright colors whose names the little boy did not know. Sunset came late in the evening. *Red sky at morning, sailor take warning*, he had learned, *Red sky at night, sailor's delight*.

The third day, late in the morning, Maryse Bell told the boy they were going to stop pulling the wagon for a bit. She helped him to steady the load, and put a rock behind each wheel. He tightened knots, one after another. It seemed important to make an inventory in her head of what they were carrying in that cart: dry goods, clothing, bedclothes, three books, an oil lamp, her husband's hats, and the pots. And other things. She was too exhausted to recall.

She looked at herself. She had grown brown and thin and hard over the past weeks. Now her legs were strained with effort and streaked with dirt and sweat. Luckily, her period had stopped. The

baby wrapped to her belly wiggled and whined.

"Take him, would you Billy Dan?" Maryse unwound the cloth that bound George Thomas to her belly. "William Daniel, come here. Take him for a minute."

William Daniel had a hard time managing the 9-pound bundle and plunked himself down on a stump holding the baby across his lap.

"Hold his head. Support his head" his Mama said, sitting down on a rock. "It was my shoes. That's why I wanted to stop. It was my damned shoes. I'm so tired I forgot why I wanted to stop William Daniel. So worn out I couldn't think."

She bent over, pulled them off, straightened the insoles, pulled taut the tongues and put them back on, lacing them tight. Slapping the dust off her dress, she looked around the horizon. She stopped to listen.

"OK. We're not far. I hear water. It's pretty close. Off that way. Must be Flint River. Whatever water it is'll do us all a world of good. Let's wind George Thomas back up."

The endless boat ride from Chattanooga cramped up on a bench and then the walk along the dusty roads and trails through the woods had made Billy Dan's gangly legs feel tight and his mouth feel dry. Water sounded good. And water was the sign they were on the right path.

"*Follow the road to where the stream dives under the highway and look right. There it will be,"* said Dot. "*It'll be a great white deep-porched place, pretty as a picture. Two Chimneys. A little balcony over the front door. Except the roof will be burned off and the balcony will have been wrecked by the fire. The cabin will be farther back, with its own porch, two rooms and an attic: it's next to the chicken coop. My father used to make my brother Grant sleep in that chicken coop with the chickens when he was bad,"* Dot had said. *"Those were the old ways."*

When they finally dragged in with their little wagon, what they

found was not a marvelous if somewhat damaged plantation house, but a burned-out shell of the antebellum beauty. And in the back garden what they found was not at all a cabin, not even a shack, but a ruin. Broken window panes, filth, no running water. Kudzu had started its work up one side of the place, pushing open a kitchen window. Maryse fell silent.

Billy Dan left her a moment and walked around the creaking rooms. When he returned, the baby was howling on his back atop that yellow shawl that had wrapped him to his mother's belly for three days. His mother was vomiting off the front porch.

Billy Dan told her it was going to be ok. They would fix all this up and it would be fine. She would see. He could imagine it. He took a stick and chased a snake out of the corner of the room. He set about looking for others. Billy Dan had no idea how dangerous his curiosity was. Thank God there were no more snakes. They were all under the porch.

Billy Dan was positive about it all, stable and careful. He looked at the place and saw, not seven years old, everything that could be done to convert that insalubrious log cabin into a convenient habitation. He would do that and much more before he reached the age of 15.

Maryse picked herself up from her knees and cleaned herself off. All she felt she could do was recall the words of her ancestor faced with the wilderness.

"'*Let not our actions be solely regulated by the wildness of our neighborhood*' William Daniel. I'm hungry."

"I found two eggs," he answered

"Ok. That's good"

"There's a goat." Billy Dan wasn't too sure what he could do with a goat, but there it was.

"Yes, let's have a look around the old house to see if there is a pump or a well of some kind. Otherwise we'll be toting water

around twice a day from down the river. I can tell you that's no fun."

"We have a guide to living like the Mohawks." Billy Dan was talking about *Letters from an American Farmer.*

"Well, to living in the wilds. And it's not really a guide, but we will learn something from that old book." Maryse was suddenly very absent again. "We will be fine. Just fine."

"They got a bed frame back there. Kind of rusty. And there's a stove in here," the boy called from inside. "It looks dead as a doornail."

"Well, we can start some sort of a fire in it I would guess. It'll be fine. *It is our discipline and our native intelligence that will keep us from degenerating into reflections of the surrounding wildness.* We need a plan. Let's think."

And so, they rolled out the barrel stuffed with clothes, and they slid out the wooden disk she used as a desk top. They dug out the ink bottles and Maryse unwrapped her precious pens and paper. Together, the boy and his mama began to consider the immense physical challenge and moral difficulty of living rough, of building an entire functioning, waterproof clockwork of a world. And for his mother, this was very important, a world that would allow William Daniel and Georgy to rejoin the ranks of the living from this private wild hell.

"Where is school?" the little boy asked.

"I don't know where the school is yet, but we will find it. What's today?"

"Thursday."

"Ok. Dot's brother is supposed to come up from Huntsville tomorrow at lunch time. We can go into town with him. Not sure how we will get back."

"Can we get a bicycle?"

"15 dollars for a bicycle. 2 weeks work for your father, if he was working."

"Do we have 15 dollars?"

"Yeah well. I think we have other things to do with our little bit of money."

It turned out they were going to need to do something else with their money. At least with part of it. When, on the Thursday, Dot's brother Grant Slade came by to see them, he told them there was a tax lien on the property they would need to settle. It was in the neighborhood of 10 dollars, but his family didn't have that to spare, he said. So, when the assessor came by later that week, they would need to give him the cash. Grant Slade looked long at the roofless attic of his family home as he gave her the news. She watched his gaze.

"Let's go have a gander," Grant said suddenly, and tromped off towards the ruins behind the big house. "The pump," he said, pointing to a blackened steel contraption. "It's a bit stiff, but if y'all oil it it'll work fine. Good underground water here. If you have a problem, the Flint river is just across the way."

Maryse and William Daniel followed in silence as the big man negotiated his way around the junk.

"Stay away from this stuff. Snakes. Kudzu's workin' its way in here, I see. Got a hatchet?"

Maryse shook her head.

"I'll bring you one. Apple trees out that way. One got scorched, but it's comin' back. August we should have something."

He turned and headed out to the chicken coop. Maryse followed, folding her skirt up in her apron as they walked across the junk. Billy Dan just tried to keep up. He watched Grant hitch up the creaking wire door to open it. Four scraggly chickens ran out. A rooster crowed.

"That makes four eggs a day. Some for you, some for me. I'll come up Sundays get mine. And my produce. Come on see where you can plant some stuff."

"I'll need to go the grocers and get some seeds."

He'd forgotten them: he pulled four packets of seed out of his pocket. "Peas, beans, turnips, cabbage. It's for you. And I've got a dozen potatoes you can plant. They're in the automobile. Ten cents, please. It's late for planting, but it might get you through some of the fall. You can have some of that corn growing out there. But it'll be a couple of months before you can pick it."

"I brought some preserves, some peaches and red beans and peas and white beans." Maryse looked into in the kitchen. "Does this oven work?"

"We'll look at it. Should be fine. I've got onions and carrots for you. Cooking oil and a bottle of milk. Beef jerky. I'll go unload the automobile. Y'all are gonna have to hunt. Got a gun?"

"Nope."

"Need a gun."

"There's a goat," said the little boy. "And we can eat snake."

Grant didn't even look at him.

"You can pay me for the groceries later."

Grant gave them permission to scavenge surviving slate shingles and building materials. He brought a few basic gardening tools, some extra wire mesh for the chicken coop which he said needed doubling up. He helped them to repair the roof over the sleeping quarters and salvaged a partially burned carpet to cover their rotting floors. And he gave them a lesson in snakes.

"So, what do you know about snakes then?" He was holding out a forked branch and allowing a snake to calmly slither up it.

"I have seen a lot of snakes, like everybody. You know, they hide under porches, some of them are dangerous and some of them are not." She watched him sling the snake as far as it would go into the wild.

"That one was dangerous. A copperhead. Could you identify it if you saw another one?"

"I didn't get a good look at it."

“Don’t worry. We’ll find another one. Where do you think you will see these boys around here?”

“Under the porch?”

“Yup. And in the entire remains of that burned-out house. It is a perfect protective nest world for them. Stay away unless you are fully equipped. Got some solid boots, you and the kid?”

“Yeah.”

“Heavy gloves too. And stay away from snakes in general. You are far away from town. If you get bit, I’m not sure what you can do. Pray I guess. Be careful. There are a lot of snakes right now. They all birth their young in May.”

He knocked on the walls and poked his head up in the attic to see if there was anything dangerous up there.

“I will come up to see you next week and we will set some traps and do some snake removal if it’s not raining too much. Now let’s get that old stove working for you.”

"Let's make a pot of something." Maryse pulled out a can of tea and the three family cups.

A cup of hot tea was a welcome thing for Maryse and Billy Dan. Grant continued to pace through the cabin, eyeing corners, looking over the window casements. When they had finished their hot drink, the big man tapped on the boy’s back with a stick. It was time to go back outside.

“If you see a snake in your windowsill, do not touch it and do not let the boy touch it. Even if the window’s open. Even if you’re cold. Even if you’re not worried. Rattlesnake-cottonmouth-coral snake-pilot-copperhead. Just learn what they look like and stay away from them. Even if you think they’re harmless.”

“The Cherokees had remedies for your snake bites.” Billy Dan seemed confident.

“Yeah, well, a lot of that is superstition boy, but apparently there are a few plants that can be useful. Like that one over there.”

His mother picked a sprig from the plant, patted it thoroughly dry and lay it between two pages of her Bible.

"My mom read us a book that tells you how to catch a rattlesnake like the Mohawks do."

"There ain't no Mohawks around here. Just stay away from the snakes."

"But you can eat 'em."

"Just stay away from 'em boy. Be-ware."

"I know," the little boy said. "The pilot snake: '*It bears the name because it always precedes the rattlesnake, that is, quits its state of torpidity in the spring before the other.*'"

"What?" Grant was not so much impressed as he was surprised.

"It's a book written by a family member. He just learns stuff."

"But you can eat snake," insisted Billy Dan.

"He's a tenacious one." The woodsman was getting a bit touchy.

Maryse was relieved when this visit was over, snakes or no snakes. She was going to be even more relieved to see him roll on down that road so she could do some thinking. Well, she was already thinking about the other stuff as Grant cranked up the automobile and plopped himself down behind the wheel.

Chapter 10: 2000

Behind the wheel of her 1990 Honda Civic, M waited. She couldn't remember ever having felt this fullness in the present before. Waiting, this sense that she might explore the emptiness of time. We wait and we wait, and nothing happens, and it is good.

The sound of iron scraping concrete came from behind the Versailles Restaurant, and the bin creaked open, the smell of garbage emerged, something dropped and the bin creaked closed.

We wait and we wait, and nothing happens, and it is good. What did that even mean? Why was she even having such thoughts? Were they thoughts? She reminded herself of where she was, waiting for the Versailles Restaurant to open, remarking the faint smell of gasoline and garbage, noticing that she had not thought about the future in four years. Waiting for Gran Lulu, waiting to celebrate her graduation from architecture school.

Her leather-bound diploma sat on the passenger's seat. She ran her thumb over the gold seal on the cover. She had just completed two degrees, an engineering degree and then architecture school in four short years, but she was not at all exhilarated by her accomplishment. She felt no emotion about it: she was just tired.

Gran, on the other hand, had been thrilled.

"Like the whiz kid you are!" she said. "Meet me Saturday at the Versailles restaurant. I will reserve the private dining room for us."

It almost seemed she hadn't waited for anything in the past four years. Madison could not recall the last time she arrived early somewhere, some classroom or some dentist's office, and waited without filling the time, without intently working on something else: reciting in her mind the soil structure of Madison County Alabama, revising a paper she needed to turn in soon, drawing elevations of fictional gingerbread façade houses, going over the engineering problems of glass-skin high-rises. Always early, she was always early. Always waiting, and she was never waiting.

"How do you pass the time waiting in a gravelly parking lot for a restaurant to open?"

She yawned. She pulled her finger across her eyelid. Wouldn't it be nice to be sleepy, to put your head back and nap as you waited. Another yawn came. But not. Madison Bell did not sleep in public. It wasn't a policy, it was just a fact. She could not sleep in public.

That boy she knew in first year of college could fall asleep anywhere. What was his name? She couldn't remember his name. He was a big guy. Started undergrad a year early. She wondered what happened to him. He carried a game-boy with him to keep him awake when he had to wait before classes. He said it was a physical thing: if he was bored, he slept, whether he wanted to or not. In class he had to doodle or make lists predicting the professor's next move. When there were questions, he knew the answers, and that seemed to irritate Dr. this or that, because it looked like he wasn't paying attention. He was kind, but in arguments he was very aggressive. He was also brutally funny from time to time. And he made her laugh. This embarrassed her because it always seemed she was the only one to get his jokes. He was pretty hard to be around in so many ways. He was distracted easily, he got on her nerves. He wanted to take her out. She was too busy. He was too young. She thought he was lazy, even if he was good in class. And she didn't do lazy. She had too much work.

"Why is he still on my mind?" she wondered out loud.

She had asked the very same question out loud at Petteway's several years ago. She was eighteen. It wasn't a real question. She was just thinking out loud around Gran Lulu as she often did.

"No choice," Gran Lulu had said.

"No choice?" Madison echoed.

"Mm hmm. You get no choice who you love as a girl loves a boy. You get no choice who you love as a friend. Exactly like you get no choice who your family is. None. Zip. Nada. You can choose who you spend time with. And you should. You can choose who you marry. And you better. You can choose who you make whoopee with. Although you are not ready for that yet. But you do not get to choose who you worry about, not who surprises you, not who makes you laugh, slows your pulse and calms your soul. You don't get to choose who could cut you to the quick if they wanted to but they wouldn't want to. You get no choice. It's real inconvenient."

Lulu Bell was definitely M's best friend. But she was a curious best friend, young Madison guessed, and not just because it was her Gran. Her brothers and cousins thought it peculiar the two would be so close because Lulu Bell was Lulu Bell, that old lady who had walked the high-wire between glamor and vulgarity her entire life. The rest of the family saw her as some sort of a circus act. This irritated Madison. All the Bells wanted in this generation was to be seen as nothing more than discreet, charming, and "boogewah". And Lulu Bell was an embarrassment who dyed her hair red (she used to dye it platinum blond), wore big rings on her knuckles and always said exactly what she thought. "It's the privilege of being Mrs. Moneybags!" she laughed privately. Madison was the most naturally discreet of the entire clan, but the only one she understood and who understood her was Gran Lulu.

What the entire family didn't know about the wild old lady (because they weren't listening) was how refined and thoughtful that mind was. Neither servile nor arrogant, she loved you or she

didn't love you, but she was decent one way or the other. They only heard the Decatur accent. Lulu hadn't finished highschool and couldn't spell worth a bag of beans. But she sure as hell could add and subtract.

And the cousins kept in mind that she was Papa Billy Dan's second wife. Their real Grandmother, they said it at every turn of private conversation, was Tamara Spencer. Lulu had no real right to Papa Billy Dan's fortune. Lulu had no kids.

Madison was shaken out of her thoughts by the sound of iron scraping concrete once again as someone opened the heavy front door of the restaurant. She shut the leather binder, pulled herself together and opened the door of the car. In she would go to wait on one of those slip-covered dining chairs with a huge baby girl pink ribbon on the back, behind the pink and black moiré-curtained doors.

*

"This place has been given a real face-lift", Gran said, sitting down.

The table was big enough for six people and it was set for four, with four cut crystal glasses for each setting, three forks, two knives, two spoons, and pink and blue flowered china.

"Huntsville's most glamorous, Gran."

"It used to look like a pink and gold version of the Alcazar room in Nashville." The waiter came to take away two place settings, as the girls looked around the room and listened to the tinkling of china and glass. When he had finished, Lulu sighed. "Much better. They have really improved it. Or no, Madison Bell, Master of architecture, no Mistress of architecture, what do you think?"

"Mistress of architecture? Good grief."

The young woman fished a pencil out of her purse, looked around the room, and pointed with the eraser towards six different parts of the space. She winced and shook her head. And shook her head again.

"Well, they could simplify and still keep the art deco glamor." Madison had a 22-year-old's seriousness about her.

"Yes, they could." Gran didn't hesitate.

"And I think this place desperately needs some natural light, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. Course I don't know what kind of a view we'd have if we put in a window."

"Gravel parking lot and Ol' Joe Johnston's Mobile Homes. You're right Gran. And that kudzu-covered shack out beyond. It's a wonder the kudzu doesn't cross the court and cover the cars."

"Cross the highway! Turn this place into a giant nubby green bowling ball. With creepy purple flowers." Lulu said it as she signaled for the waiter.

"What the heck could we do with this place?" Madison was thoughtful. "Skylights? Move it to a better site? But still it is so glamorous. You feel like a girl from a 1930's movie in here, don't you?"

"Reminds me of the dining room in *Bringing up Baby* where Cary Grant ripped the hell out of Katherine Hepburn's dress."

"What?"

"Don't you remember that movie?" Lulu seemed surprised. "You gotta see that movie again honey."

"That's the one with the dog and the leopard?"

"That's it, baby: *Who's got the intercostal clavicle?*"

A waiter appeared, took their order and disappeared. Gran narrowed her eyes.

"Yeah, well really Madison Bell, this place is what happens when you give too much money to snobs who wish they lived in Plantation houses in the Confederate south."

"Yep. I do sort of agree."

Lunch came and went and the two women sat back in their pink moiré chairs.

"You know your Granddaddy was the finest man I ever knew. But he was really way too cheap. My Lord all he wanted was a well-built tract house on a flat and empty lot within spitting distance of the woods. And a bank vault."

"Can't forget the bank vault." Madison and her Gran spoke in unison.

"But I'll give this to him, my little Madison: he lived for the light. He had that solid modern place built so that there would be no corners of shadow in it. It was striking in a 1960's sort a way, you know."

"1940's I think Gran. And I believe it had been built before Papa Billy Dan acquired it. I think that's what he said."

"You're right. These things that just slip out of my mind..."

Lulu tapped away a tear from the corner of her eyes and Madison decided to distract her.

"But yes, it is luminous: you come in and the light leads you from room to room. And the living room that faces the swimming pool, with those huge windows, and the pearl grey carpet exactly the color of the terrace tiles, the inside reveals the outside. Reminds me of the work of a Mexican architect … I cannot remember his name. Anyway. Not a Cracker Jack box at all like all those tract houses near the Arsenal. Could use some trees, though."

"Yeah, it could sweetie pie. Some trees and a couple of crystal chandeliers. Marble sinks in the bathroom..."

"You think you wanted that, but have you done any of that since he died?" Madison's heart sank when she said that last word. Papa Billy Dan hadn't been gone six months. She re-focused. "I can't see you living like that Gran. You are a modern girl, probably more modern than I am."

"Hmm."

“You know I probably went to architecture school because I was always listening to you complain about ugly architecture.”

“No.”

“Yeah I think so.”

“Well, imagine that. My whining will have influenced the future of architecture in the great state of Alabama.” She looked off towards the door to the main dining room. “Well. I really invited you here to celebrate, not to complain. Waiter! The champagne please and those nice little pink and green *e*-clairs, that sounds good doesn’t it? Two of each.”

Gran did not wait for Madison or the waiter to reply. She just took a Hallmark card envelope out of her purse and thrust it forward on the table to Madison.

“Go ahead sweetie pie, open it!”

"Mmm." Madison held it up to her nose. " It smells like lavendar. That always reminds me of you, Gran." A bank check fell out on the table. It took her a second to focus on the numbers on the check.“I can’t take this Gran.”

“Hush. You can take it. “

“No,” Madison said. "No, I can't, but thank you."

“You must.”

“I must not.”

“Yes you must and you will. And then, hold on to this money you hear? A girl has got to have her private savings. I have mine, and there’s the proof. Mine. Not Papa Billy Dan's. Mine. Our savings? Men are to be kept in the dark about it. They’ll try to influence you and they’ll succeed too, cause we love ‘em too much.”

Madison was not old enough to know how to resist her Gran on this. Even so, she felt very worried. Her brothers and cousins could be upset by this money.

"I am dead serious Madison. A woman will always need her nest egg for her and her children. My mother left me hers, though it was lean. Your mama died too young to leave you hers. So I am leaving you mine. So don't you dare tell anybody, especially not that beau of yours, and not your Daddy either."

"Well I don't know Gran."

"Yes you do, you know in your heart. I have already paid the taxes on it, so don't you worry. Go to one or two banks that no one banks at. Go to Nashville, why not? Or for Papa Billy Dan's memory, go to Chattanooga."

"My head is sort of spinning here."

"No it's not. Your feet are planted solidly on the ground, as always. Put the money in a CD or two or three. Not variable rates. Fixed rates. No pension funds. Nancy Miller always said avoid pension funds like the plague. They are con games. And no commodities market either. This is not for speculation, this is not for interior decoratin': this is for peace in your heart, so that you never stay anywhere because you don't have a choice. When you make your own money, you can speculate with it. If you never need this, you'll leave it to your daughter. When you have one."

"I'm speechless," Madison finally said.

"That's modest of you. Put this on deposit pretty fast, because down at the bank they are going to want to give me a call and I don't want to be dead when they get around to it."

Lulu didn't wait for her granddaughter to reply, she just started picking up her things.

"You know your grandfather did the only stupid thing he ever did in his life in this place. Get me out of here. Knock back that champagne, we'll get one of those sweet little boxes for these e-clairs. Shall we go get our nails done?"

Chapter 11: 1961

It was nearly midnight and William Daniel Bell was immersed in *Gold and the Dollar Crisis*. Again. Bell had picked this book up and put it down so many times since 1959. He couldn't finish the damned thing. It knocked him off keel. How could the solution to America's economic woes be less gold or more deficits? Yeah, he followed the general argument. Being the currency on which all other currencies depended was dangerous.

What bothered him was this feeling that somehow money was not what he thought it was. Since his youth he had been very careful not to be without enough cash to make it through one year without changing the way he lived. He had bought a few gold ingots, feeling quite confident it was the best possible investment. And now, ever since he bought this damned book, he wondered whether his thrift made sense. Maybe his cash or even his gold wasn't worth what he thought. What the hell would people do if their cash wasn't worth the paper it was printed on? What if even his gold did not protect him?

He recalled his Mama reading out loud stories in *The New York Times* of Germans bringing wheelbarrows of cash to buy bread. And of course, Alabamans told similar stories about the period

after the Civil War. At this point, as usual, he dropped the book, saying it out loud, "Humans always survive. We did."

The phone rang. Bell picked it up, swept the cord away from the table and held the heavy receiver to his ear.

"Yep, hello."

Someone was talking pretty loud on the other end.

"What are you doin' callin' me at this time of night Georgy? You'll wake the boys."

William Daniel looked out the window into the blackness of the woods at night.

"Your one call? What are you on about?"

A lozenge of light drew across his empty lawn as he paced. Was that someone driving slowly by his house? Or was that light shifting because he was moving through the rooms?

"Oh my God Georgy, who did you get in a fight with?" He shook his head and kept his eye on his lawn. The dark seemed to move. It was probably an animal.

"Right then. Ok. Yup, I'll come. How can I get to your check book?" He set the phone down heavily on the table.

"No Georgy I do not have the keys to your place. No. There will be no next time. But yup, I'll be there. Might take an hour. Gotta get Nellie Maude to come on over and watch the boys. Yeah. Watch the boys sleep. Yeah. Ok."

The holding cells in the Huntsville Police Station looked way too much like the ones in that old movie *Bringing up Baby*. Louella James, the singer from the Yardbird almost laughed out loud thinking about it. And the policemen were even better stereotypical hicks than in the movies.

"Where's the leopard?" She called out. "Who's got the intercostal clavicle?"

No one was getting the joke. And then that mean-faced Irishman strolled by to look at her legs from time to time.

"You could die of suffocation in this town." Lulu needed a cigarette.

"I don't mind this town," George answered from the men's cell.

"Is that what this is about? Some bourgeois lady who doesn't like the fact that Huntsville is boring?" The young guy who said it had a Brooklyn accent.

"Bourgeois! Why honey thank you! That's the first time anyone ever called me bourgeois…Why can't I have a cigarette again?" Lulu ran her fingernails against the bars of the holding tank.

"The lumpen proletariat aspires to nothing more than the decadence of the bourgeoisie."

"How'd I go from bourgeois to lumpy? Un-thank you dear."

"This guy's speaking Chinese." Sherry sounded exhausted. "Would you just shut up?"

"Let me be simple and clear. This is about police harassment. We are political prisoners. This is all about the threat of negroes and white people spending peaceful time together."

Sherry, huddled on a bench in the women's tank, looked a little grey around the gills. Luella put her hand on her pregnant friend's shoulder.

"This stinking situation is stressing out Sherry." George was openly irritated. "And so are you boy, would you shut up?"

"Who is Sherry?"

"Now, my wife is pregnant. And when I said would you shut up, that was not a question."

"Nothing came of this damn raid. NO moonshine, NO mary jane. Nothing." The New Yorker spoke very loud this time.

"Not a question." George stepped in close.

The Andy Griffith Show, that TV show about a country bumpkin police station, was blasting somewhere. **"Y'all shouldn't get into a pissing match with a Skunk, Barney!"** Andy said. **"Now Andy!"** Aunt Bea was scolding Sheriff Andy, and the Huntsville policemen watching the show were laughing.

"They just had a good time busting up our good time," The Northerner was mumbling now.

From another room someone shouted "Even New Yorkers don't have brass balls honey!" and merriment rang out among the officers.

William Daniel arrived in front of the holding tank with a still snickering police officer.

"These are the people you are letting out on bail for me."

"George Bell. Sherry Bell." The officer was reading his list. "Nap-tali Peterson. What sort of a name is that?"

"Read your Bible ," snapped Louella James.

"So where is he or she or whatever?" The Irish officer asked.

"She's in the nigger's tank," said someone from the other room.

"In the other wing," The Irish guy was being snide. "Let Nap-tali Peterson out would you?"

William Daniel Bell yawned. He looked tired and grey and impatient.

"It ain't my fault Billy Dan." Georgy was a little brother again.

"I know it ain't your fault. Next time bring your own checkbook."

"It ain't his fault," Sherry repeated. "We are so tired. Can't we just go?"

"Of course it ain't his fault Sherry, I know it ain't his fault. But he will give me my money back anyway."

"We will all give you your money back, Mr. Bell," snapped Naphtali as she was being escorted out from the Colored Tank.

"Hmmm."

"And Lulu, will too, won't you Lulu?" pitched in Sherry.

"Who is Lulu?"

"Noo noo noo noo noo…" Louella turned her back and walked to the other end of the space.

"She's a friend of mine," said Sherry. "She's a great singer and a great friend."

In this family argument about who would cover Lulu's bail, Naphtali stayed at a cool distance, and Lulu wanted no part of it. William Daniel had been ruminating about how to keep stable savings all evening, and here he was, still immersed in those worries and out $225 in bail to boot. Upping it to $300 for a complete stranger raised his blood pressure a notch. Even if he was going to get it all back. But Georgy and Sherry would not let go.

"No no. The band will cover me." Lulu waved them all away.

"Do you know that for a fact? And will they take you home?" George asked her.

She didn't say anything. William Daniel looked at her hard a second. Could he trust this woman? She looked extravagant and bright eyed. But could he trust her? Oh for God's sake, he thought. Seventy five dollars was just not that much. As he was considering the idea, some clown in the men's tank yelled that she should take it because he had big bucks. Now <u>that</u> irritated him.

"Well whoop-dy-doo." Lulu responded.

"The lady doesn't want my money." He liked her a little better already.

"No, she doesn't." Lulu pulled on her black gloves. She had seen this tall man somewhere before, a long time ago. But she just couldn't shake loose the information from her memory. Where had she seen him? No matter. She wasn't going to look at him; right now, he was getting on her nerves

"Well pay it anyway Billy Dan. I'm not leaving her alone with that police chief guy gawking at her," Sherry said.

William Daniel turned to Lulu and looked at her. "You're *gonna* show up for court."

"I said I don't want your damned money. If you insist on paying my bail, you're on your own."

Chapter 12: 1918

"We are on our own out here. So. Ok." Maryse Bell nodded and put her hand on Billy Dan's forehead as if to check for a temperature, and then on top of his head. She did not want to communicate her worry. She and her boy had been listening to the landlord mumble on. He seemed neither excited nor particularly afraid: he seemed numb.

The first symptoms of what he called “The Black Flu," Grant Slade explained, were just like the regular flu.

“The fever is a little hotter, sometimes the eyes go bloodshot. And then your nose bleeds. You don’t want your nose to bleed.”

“Mmhmm.” William Daniel was seven. He made this noise to pretend he knew what the big deal was. His Mama glanced his way and then looked back at Grant.

“A thousand people in Huntsville have died of the flu? You’re sure that’s the number?”

“A thousand and some. In fact, you don’t want that first bout at all, because even if you stay warm and drink a whole “battle o’ whisky” to kill the germs, it could come back from the dead. And

if it comes back, it turns you kind of purply brown starting at the cheekbones and spreading all over your face. It don't spread much farther, because then you be dead. About three thousand cases in town they say. Doctors are sick. Drugstores are closed. The state is going to close schools, so my boy you are a lucky dog."

"He likes school," said the young mother. "But then everything can be school, so that'll be fine. We'll be fine."

Grant sneezed into a handkerchief.

"This is just a cold," he said, and coughed. "but that reminds me. Boil everything. Don't be drinking from the same cups and spoons and the like. Cover your face if you sneeze. But if you folks start with it out here, I wonder if there's any point being careful."

He sighed. Maryse Bell looked frozen in her tracks.

"Well, boil everything."

"Yes, we'll boil everything." Mrs. Bell was being polite, even with the full blow of this conversation. "Grant, next time you come, could you bring us a few things? A kettle, some strong white vinegar and baking soda and a dozen jam jars? Some bacon. Shall I pay you now?"

"No. No. Later."

And Grant was on his way.

William Daniel followed him to his car. It was early October, a bit bright, a bit soggy, a bit cool. The boy felt like an adult. He and his mama had just fixed the stove again that week. They had the snake and rat population under control using wire contraptions around the bottom of the porch. His stuff was working, at least more or less. The chickens were doing ok. The kudzu was cut back. The cat and the goat were happy. But the seven-year-old wasn't an adult, he was a kid: he didn't see the problem with the flu.

The boy watched Grant climb into his automobile and cough as he drove away.

When he came back into the house his Mama was praying. It was the only time he ever saw her pray. And then that was it. They

sat down at the kitchen table and thought about things together. Georgy was about a year old at that point and fast asleep in the other room. This was serious business, just for the big boy and his Mama. She put down two glasses and poured a little whisky in each one. “Gargle” she had said, so that’s what he did, but it about killed him. Her own glass she knocked back. They’d received a letter from Daddy recently. The family all had to stay alive on one side like on the other of the Atlantic Ocean.

“We'll need to prepare and to act. Eat well, stay warm, and stay out of drafts. Keep the baby from doing foolish things. You’ll be a big help William Daniel. And I must say, I have never before been happy not to live in town.”

She went to get out one her old dresses and she and Billy Dan sat and tore it up into handkerchiefs in case they got that blasted flu.

They’d heard about it before of course. William Daniel had been back at school for three or four weeks. Every kid knew someone who was sick. But a thousand dead people was a number that was just beginning to make sense to him. He had counted to a thousand once to see how long it would take him. It took a long time.

A week later Grant Slade’s son Gareth came by to check up on them, brought them their order from town. With the cast iron kettle, vinegar, jam jars, and baking powder, Grant had sent a bottle of bootleg whisky, a couple of oranges, some tinned beans and some ham on a hock.

“Got you some Vic’s VapoRub just in case. Got it from the only pharmacist left in town.”

“Well, thank you Gary,” Maryse said. “Very much.”

“Had to wait in line outside.”

“Double thanks then. What do I owe you?”

“They serve you from the door. All the doctors are sick,” Gary

went on, unconscious of her question. “No more post office delivery. If you wanted a job, you could get $25 a week as a nurse’s aide at the hospital. But you got the kids. So. Well, here you go. Make it last, I won’t be coming back for a while.”

“What do I owe you?” she dug into her apron and pulled out some coins.

“That’ll do,” he fished some coins from her hand. “Got eggs for me?”

Chapter 13: 2011

Madison Bell-Garth had the dream again. The kudzu covered house, the fire of gold deep within. This time she went walking into the property, pried open the front door of the kudzu strangled house, and followed a cat inside. The house was long and narrow, and while a light was burning inside, she smelled no smoke. It was a very distressed house she thought. But somewhere, back in there, she needed to find the safe deposit box.

She registered that she could hear Bloomberg News blasting in the kitchen and it took her a second to realize that it was Bloomberg News blasting in *her* kitchen, not in the kitchen of the kudzu covered house. Time to tumble back into the game of life. She kicked off the covers.

"Good morning," she yawned as she padded in to pour her coffee. "Say good morning, honey."

Glen poked his Blackberry. He was playing App-omattox again.

"Is the South winning this time?" She patted him on the head. He paid no more attention to her than he did to the financial news. "You could answer me you know?"

"I'm concentrating."

"Yup ok. Shower. Me. Now."

*

Madison tipped down the back steps, newspaper in one hand, briefcase in the other. She paused to consider the dreadful mess of her back yard. HPD had finally taken down the crime scene tapes, but not before digging up a large part of her property. She'd get a professional landscape architect to set up the kitchen garden this time. Chester was a good gardener, had always taken great care of their properties, but he was getting old.

When she arrived at Bell-Garth Woolson, Trish was walking towards her holding out a cup of coffee with a beignet perched on the saucer. She was talking.

"There was no really interesting information available about your home from the title searches until you get back to about 1965. Your house had been bought by something called Randolph properties in 1965. They bought the place next door at the same time. At that time each house was divided up into four apartments, rented out by the absentee landlord."

"Ok. And then?"

"The closest thing to Huntsville hippies that Alabama ever saw moved into the building next door and set their place on fire on Halloween night 1971. They chose a night it wasn't raining. The roof burned off and yours caught fire too. Half your roof went and so did the west rooms of the top floor. During the following nine months the absentee landlord was maybe suing the people who started the fire and trying to get insurance money on the house? It's not clear. Anyway the house remained exposed to the elements. It was infested with cockroaches and rats."

"Eahh, lgliach. Uh I don't want to know that! Did they win the lawsuit?"

"If there was one, I imagine they did. "

"The lawsuit was against the hippies?"

"Would have been."

"You mean you don't know."

"Mmm. Sorry." Trish didn't know.

"What *do* we know?"

"Well, we know that both places were bought by another partnership immediately after the fire. The two places were rebuilt in 1972. I can't tell how they managed to rebuild so fast."

"Maybe they had a lot of money."

"Yeah or if they won a lawsuit you know… Then it was sold to still another partnership, LJWDB, in 1986."

"Good God this is complicated."

"I know."

"Maybe I should just read the report."

"Report?"

"Or just summarize your notes and I'll read it. That should do it. This afternoon enough time?"

"Uh. Ok."

"Great. Thanks Trish."

It turned out that Madison's house had remained an apartment building as homes around it began to be renovated. Then in 2000 yet another partnership bought it for a song, and it was painted pale grey, and some of the inner walls were knocked down to turn it back into a single family dwelling with a lot of bathrooms and not enough windows. Six bedrooms and four bathrooms. They tried to honor the original style of the house, but the only thing that was authentic was the ground floor parquet and the South facade.

"Yep we knew that." Madison said it out loud as she was reading.

This is what it looked like when Madison and Gran Lulu went to visit it. Cleaned up, strangely appointed, very peculiar layout

with bizarre marks on the hardwood floors where walls had been built up and knocked down and built up and knocked down again.

Madison's assistant tapped on the door as she walked in.

"Excuse me?" Trish said.

"Amateurs should not renovate fine homes." Madison Bell -Garth put the papers down on her desk. "Thanks for the fast work on that report, Trish. Have I got any lunch appointments?"

"Nooo…But The new Police chief, Mr. Manville, wondered when you could come in for an interview."

"That's fine, you can make some room for him on a Monday afternoon I would guess. I imagine he'll want to talk to Glen too? Find out and then call Glen to make an appointment that suits us both. Tell him I told you to call on his private cell. His secretary is such a case don't you think? And then check to see if the Huntsville Historical Society stays open at lunch would you? I still have some questions on my house. Let me know their hours."

"Ok. But what do you need with those old biddies at HHS? You can get everything you need on your I-phone."

"Probably not. We'll see," Madison said. She set her phone spinning on the polished desk top.

Chapter 14: 1962

Chief of Police Wally McPherson watched his pen spin on the front desk. He really did not want to be here, now, with these women in front of him.

He was a big hunk of a man, still blond and handsome at 54 years old, and still the alpha male in most rooms. But not a relaxed alpha male. He lived with clenched fists. He was a first-generation immigrant from Ireland, born of two leprechaun-sized Dubliners in New Jersey of all places, and in his childhood, he'd been given the nickname "Wally Mac," which of course he did not like.

Here in Alabama, Wally Mac had to keep the Huntsville fellas happy and keep their minds off his very slight New Jersey Irish accent. Part of that involved being a figure in the local faction of the KKK. In return for his brotherhood, he received loyalty. In return for the loyalty, he allowed the boys to have their heads, to keep *The Andy Griffith Show* and reruns of old movies droning in the background of that police station all day long. And he said yes to just about every favor he was asked.

The boys would not look kindly on this polite conversation he was having with a floozy and a Nigra lady at the front desk. When the two women walked in, Wally Mac rolled his eyes and sent Ser-

geant Cooper back into the archives.

He'd been listening to this story for a full two minutes. Right now, he was looking at his knuckles, wondering if Cooper was still listening from the other room.

"It was an off-duty ambulance driver who arrived first at the scene." The colored lady was reading a hand-written text very clearly. "The car had just stopped spinning on its roof. When he got to the wreck, he came close to my boy and heard him whisper '*That was fun. But I can't open my eyes.*' The ambulance driver said '*Hold on, I'm here with you. Your eyes are swollen shut from the centrifugal force of the accident. Stay with me here. You are one lucky son of a bitch. My partner has called the police and the fire department*.' '*What happened*?' my boy rasped. '*Well you've been in an accident.' 'Well I know that.*' he whispered. '*I've lost feeling in my legs. I might have some sort of damage to my [no one heard this part]. I see a lot of red behind my eyelids.*' The driver told my boy someone in the other car was badly hurt. *'Be right there'* he said." She looked up from her paper. "And then everything was screaming at once, the police sirens, the Fire Department trucks, and the boy in the other car. The screaming from the other car was so much wilder, so much scarier than my boy's reaction. My boy James was in medical school. He was going to be a doctor. He was trying not to use up all his energy I guess."

Lulu grabbed Naphtali's hand and held it firmly.

"That's fine Lulu, I do not need help standing up. I am speaking for my son, my young man here." She turned to McPherson again. "So, the police decided that the screamer was the most important one, and ordered the fire department to '*leave the nigger where he was, he'd be ok.'* Those were the words. The ambulance driver…"

"Get to the point lady."

"Criminal negligence."

"That clear enough for you Wally Mac?" Snapped Lulu.

"Whose criminal negligence?" He kept his eyes on Naphtali

Peterson.

"The ambulance driver did not agree to abandon my son, he said, but he was 'physically over-ruled'. Those were his words. We don't have the police officers' names, so, the Huntsville PD will have to do. Do you have the accident report?"

"Well, Mrs. James, Mrs. Patterson"

"Miss James. Mrs. Peterson," Naphtali replied.

"Well whatever your damned names are"

"He doesn't know my name?" Lulu said this to the gallery.

"What does physically over-ruled mean? And who was this ambulance driver?"

"We will talk about that in court." Lulu opened her clutch and clicked it shut.

It was a bit much to McPherson to hear Lulu speak so primly.

"Can I please file my report?" Naphtali controlled her fury, trying to keep her eye on the ball.

"Complaint."

"Or, 'have your lawyer call my lawyer' as Mr. William Daniel Bell says." Lulu felt this was a problem as soon as she had said it.

"Mr. Bell? What has Mr. Bell got to do with this?" McPherson's fingernails dug into his palms.

"This lady is Mr. Bell's personal assistant. And accountant."

"Uh huh." McPherson was looking down at the papers on the desk. "Why'd you wait so long to file a complaint Mrs. Patterson?"

"Peterson." Naphtali said nothing else.

"Mr. Bell encouraged her to do it." Lulu tapped her red fingernails on the counter. "Before the statue of limitations ran out. She didn't know it was possible."

"Statute." McPherson spit on his thumb and tore a form off a

pad.

"What?"

"Statute of limitations. Fill this out."

Naphtali pulled the pen and form out of his hand and started filling it in with Lulu looking over her shoulder.

McPherson wasn't sure what he would do next. Lose the paperwork? He really didn't know. Now that God damned Lulu James his son was living with was filing complaints on behalf of that God damned negro lady Nap-whateveritwas Peterson and her son and claiming connections to the legendary and eccentric William Daniel Bell. The boy was dead. He'd been dead these three years. He was gone. What were they thinking they were going to do about it? Pull strings? Better pull strings with God. That's the only way a complaint was ever going to do them any good.

His no-damned-good son John was just having a go at him. He told Lulu to do this. Johnny knew he had been the policeman at the scene of that accident. But did he tell Lulu? Not sure. Not sure. His boy was so beautiful, but there was something wrong with him. Once he'd even said he wanted to be a 'man of the cloth'. He was no saint: that kid'd take a go at anything. He'd always been like that. And he'd say anything to rile up his old man. Underneath his nervous praying hide, his Johnny was a rattlesnake.

A couple of days after Naphtali Peterson had filed her complaint, Wally McPherson dropped in on his son's house. He didn't even want to know anymore why his boy and Lulu didn't get married. He just wanted her out.

In the dark house, John was sitting listening to the baseball game on the radio. Lulu was tiptoeing around that day. McPherson kicked the side of his son's big arm chair.

"So what are you, a lump? A six-foot four lump?"

Wally Mac had first seen that laughing floozy in the tank. And

there she was again, walking through the room like she was somebody's wife. How the hell did his strapping blond boy, quarterback on the football team, ever meet up with a loose-lipped girl like her? She wasn't even that pretty, except for the legs.

"Some guy paid her bail that day she was in the tank you know."

"Now Wally Mac," Lulu jumped in, "I didn't even know John at that time and…"

"Some guy paid for her though."

"It was Sherry and Georgy's brother for heck's sake. It was William Daniel Bell."

"That's right" the old man said, making that connection. "It was Mr. William Daniel Bell."

"I didn't even know him at the time. It was a loan."

John shot her a black look. Wally Mac kept working his game.

"So you know him now then?" McPherson didn't know what he meant by that sentence, but he thought it was kind of funny that she was getting so damned nervous.

Chapter 15: 1962; 1918-19

1962

Bell's Mama was so damned nervous those years after the war. She just would set about lecturing you, and you wouldn't really understand what she was saying. But there are certain sentences, William Daniel thought, certain phrases that haunt you throughout your life. Or certain speeches. You remember them, you don't know what the point was when those words were spoken, but they keep yielding private meaning over and over again in your life, in different parts of your time, of your world, without ever revealing the initial intent.

"If you think about it, William Daniel, there's just too much to do. There's always too much to do. Everywhere you look in a homestead, nature is pushing in on you. It fights you tooth and nail. You fight back. You are in the garden, working on your knees and you feel ants crawling up your legs. Anthills. Swarms of fruit flies multiply in the kitchen, brown rot on the quince trees, make the list. Don't make the list. Don't make the list. Because if you make the list, you'll stop working on what's in front of you. You just do what you have to do, because this is where you are."

1918

His mother was lecturing him again. He had been a bit out of

character that afternoon; he'd headed off for a walk in the woods. He needed out. This spot, this place, this territory, this entire earth suddenly seemed very strange to him. He was tired of it.

"I feel like I work all the time and I never get anywhere. Can we get a dog?"

"A dog? What does a dog have to do with anything?"

"Grant says we need a dog."

Before the fire which destroyed his family home, Grant had cleared out a block of land and planted four short rows of corn. When the Bells arrived, there it was, three-foot-high, giant blades of new grass in the spring. They walked through the rows and felt the young ears of corn. Grant said they needed to get a dog, or do something else about the raccoons. The coons didn't particularly like corn, but they would come for it anyway.

Maybe they would get a dog sometime later, but at that point, his mama said, they couldn't get one.

That first year the corn was fine. When the tassels turned brown and the cobs swelled, he and his Mama picked the corn. Most of it was for Grant.

But the second year, the year of the drought, the raccoons took most of the young corn.

August 1918 was dry as a bone in Alabama. Even the kudzu got tired out. The corn had mostly burnt a dark brown.

The sheaves were noisy and paper-like as William Daniel walked through the rows one day, and there in front of him, big as life, scared as it could be, a bloody nosed raccoon. It didn't know what to do and neither did the boy. So Billy Dan turned around and walked away.

Then September was a deluge. The pumpkins and squash had first been slow to grow and now they were mildewed. William Daniel and his Mama struggled to follow the rhythm of this new

reality. Protecting, caring for, and maintaining themselves, their plants and their livestock. Transforming the stuff of their homestead into food.

November 1918 gave them a break. Nature was generous. Eggs, rabbits, quail, chicory and beans. They lived, they ate, they drank and they repaired stuff. They had a couple of weeks to go to work on the kudzu that had pushed into Grant's house. No one came to see them. They knew nothing at all about the Armistice until the day after Thanksgiving when Grant's daughter Gillian finally came by. She seemed changed: burnt out and mildewed like the kitchen garden. She had lost two brothers and a baby to the black flu.

She handed two newspapers and an envelope to Maryse Bell, and a small bag of walnuts to the boys. Maryse ripped the envelope open and walked away reading it. Miss Gillian Slade had to think up something to say to Billy Dan and Georgy. She didn't know when the schools would open again. She'd been down to the celebration in Birmingham you know?

Billy Dan didn't know what she was talking about; she had to explain that the war was over. There had been a big Armistice celebration in B'ham. A huge funny mock funeral for Kaiser Wilhelm. Then the next day people were dropping like flies. The flu had come back. She was ok she said. She was ok.

After Gillian left, the young mother sat her boys down at table and poured each a shot of moonshine, which she called o-de-vee. *Gargle!* she said, triumphant. The boys were surprised. Georgy laughed. They choked and spat out the moonshine.

"There is good news." She drank her own shot. "Your Daddy might even be here for Christmas."

Miss Slade came again in early December and brought a couple of newspapers and onions and a bottle of alcohol.

The two boys just had time to transplant those onions before the sky grew heavy and low and tiny white grains began to fall, getting bigger and bigger. Little Georgy loved the snow.

George and William Daniel walked out in the snowfall to trek through the woods and find wild holly and ivy and mistletoe for their papa's return. Christmas Eve the wood-burning stove smoked and sputtered and quails were simmering in the cast-iron kettle. But their Daddy did not come home.

Instead, Gillian Slade came by on Boxing Day to say that her big brother Grant had died of the flu. Maryse Bell stood on the porch and looked blankly at her. Billy Dan mumbled some sort of "Very sorry to hear that Miss Gillian."

Gillian turned heel and walked towards what used to be the porch of her family home and wandered among the ruins of her childhood, now invaded by the kudzu that the Bells were constantly fighting back. She would come by again pretty soon she said. But she never did, not for four years.

Marvin Bell, husband and father, arrived with his regiment in Montgomery in early May 1919. It was not until end May that he made it home. The garlands of wild holly and ivy were drying around the porch, still waiting for his return. When she saw the car coming down the road, Maryse hiked up her skirt, grabbed up Georgy in her arms and ran like the dickens out to meet him.

As soon as baby Georgy saw his Daddy he started crying from fear. Marvin Bell had become a man whose emotions moved quickly across his face.

"Don't be afraid little tiger, I'm your Daddy! Come here tiger-bear, come on!"

1962

Someone knocked on the door. William Daniel looked up from the specs on his desk. It was Naphtali, apparently back to work from her appointment at the Huntsville PD. And there was that flashy lady from the tank last year, the one who didn't want his bail money.

"She's not feelin' too well." Lulu James said.

"I'm fine. Will you stop it?" Naphtali Peterson took off her coat and walked back to her desk.

The lady with the red lipstick blinked directly at William Daniel and then followed Naphtali back to her desk. She spoke quietly into Naphtali's ear.

"Y'all need anything, you know how to reach me, right?"

"Mm hmm." Naphtali restrained her impulse to say something a little sharp to her blond friend.

William Daniel decided that Mrs. Peterson needed some privacy right now, and after escorting Miss James back out, he put his nose back into the specs and continued noting the list of questions he had about them on a legal pad.

"Don't make that list. Don't make that list," his mother's voice said. "*Because if you make the list, you'll stop working on what's in front of you."*

1919

As if he were returning from holidays, Marvin Bell brought a plate with a picture of the Rouen Cathedral for Maryse, and for his two boys, one spiked helmet, one cannon casing and two rifles. For himself, he brought four harrowing nightmares that he was to have over and over again every night of his life. And some afternoons.

Once he was back, Maryse was anxious and active. Her mind had stopped slipping during the months the little family had managed alone. She steeled herself for her wait. But when he arrived, she seemed to just let go, let the girdle of her mind open up and float.

"You just do what you have to do, because this is where you are," she said.

Chapter 16: 2011

In 2010 Madison Bell-Garth had looked around at her life, her husband and her house, and although she was only thirty-two, she felt old. "This is where you are," she sighed. "I just do what I have to do, because this is where I am."

But in that late spring of 2011, after the incident with the bags of money, she started to feel alive again.

Bell-Garth Woolson was pretty quiet at lunchtime. The assistants and the interns retreated to the coffee room to open their Tupperware and do crossword puzzles. The executives went to their business lunches, and the junior architects all filed off to whatever trendy place young architects go at noon. As the boss, Madison Bell didn't have a lunch break: the middle of her day was spent nourishing contacts, sketching out contracts at her desk over a salad and a diet Coke, giving the occasional interview for the press, rewriting proposals.

A couple of weeks after the discovery in her back yard, she started refusing all luncheon appointments. She would do all that outside work in the early evening. Glen didn't mind and most investors preferred a sunset view from the top floor of the newly

renovated Russel Erskine Hotel to the glassiness of her offices anyway.

Instead, Madison spent her lunch hour digging for information in the Huntsville Public Library or in City Hall. Her telephone was off when Glen would call at his appointed time, but he never said anything about it.

Multiple title searches from the early twentieth century: that's what filled her lunchtime now. Little pink and yellow cards. Fading bank archives from banks long closed. Crumbling transparent paper from the period when people used mechanical typewriters and carbon paper. On one flimsy yellowing page, in red, there was a record of a certain "Slate" who managed the building next to her house in the late 1960s. She didn't know anyone named Slate.

The family knew some Slades though. They were Po'Buckrah, to use a term that made her Granddad glower.

The Huntsville Historical society had pictures of one of the Slade women at work in the early 1950's. A white woman who took in laundry and minded children, how about that? She looked 50 if she looked a day. But she was only 27. And she had a mean hearted face. The face was vaguely familiar. There was her birthdate, born July 13th, 1926. Friday the 13th.

"Knew a woman once who ragged on about being born on Friday the 13th." Lulu's voice emerged from Madison's mind. "She blamed everything that ever happened to her on that number. Nonsense! She was much better off than the rest of her brood, some of 'em died young, others ended up in jail. What nonsense that woman spouts!"

Madison stood up from the oak library desk and stretched out her back. She found the history of the properties fascinating. *But this is getting nowhere,* she thought. *What difference could it make who owned this property before me? They sure would not have sold the property without taking their buried treasure. The filthy lucre from the backyard, it's from somewhere else.*

Chapter 17: 1963

If the tornado hadn't hit the house across the street and blown its bright red front door through her living room window, Lulu would have been dead. But John McPherson, rather than allowing the tornado to accompany his rage and make it rise to its bloody conclusion, turned suddenly weepy and apologetic, as if caught in the act by God.

"That's all right," Lulu managed to get the words out through swollen lips. "Get in the cellar like a good boy. Go on now."

He began to control his sobs. She stepped back away from him, and said, surprised by her own tenderness, "We will fix this. We will fix all this. Now get, go go go, it's coming again."

He lumbered to the door and held it open behind him.

"You coming?"

"In a minute in a minute." She could feel one of her lower teeth had loosened. "Go. I am putting on my shoes."

The door closed behind him. She continued speaking gently as if he heard her. "Just getting these shoes on." She reached for the phone and heard the dial tone. Why weren't the phone lines down?

“Call, damn it. But not the cops ," she lisped. “Not the cops.” The dialing made so much noise. But the wind made more. The phone rang on the other end and she held her belly tight. “Answer answer answer. Georgy it’s me. Sherry come get me ," she whispered, keeping her eye on the cellar door. “Come get me now. Don’t matter if it’s blowin’. I’ll be heading down Teejay Drive. Come get me now.”

She swiped an old sweater to wrap around her swollen face and left through the kitchen door, and you could see her walking down Teejay in the wind and the rain and the blowing stuff, walking and then running and then walking.

Chapter 18: 1920

William Daniel ran and then walked and then ran. Georgy trotted back and forth between him and Daddy. Daddy walked at a determined pace looking out over the heads of his children towards a world they could not see. They were all on their way out to visit the little cornfield and especially to inspect William Daniel's raccoon trap.

Marvin had been back from the war for almost a year. He slept quite a lot. Billy Dan had been at school for that same full year, and even so continued his own routine, taking care of the corn, fighting back the kudzu, and moving the goat from one place to another. Controlling the rats and the snakes and the raccoons.

The father and his sons stood and looked at the rough-trimmed five-foot high bramble hedge. From outside the patch, the corn sheaves peaked out over the top. Billy Dan had recently cut a trench all around it. Right now it was a pretty bone-dry moat, and the plants were slipping, and the stakes had shifted in the ground. Together, Marvin and his sons used some branches to hitch up the brambles, and then they closed the gaps in the wall of thorns and drove the stakes deeper into the earth. Marvin stood looking at their work for quite a while.

“Where’d you get the idea?” the man asked.

“I don’t know," Billy Dan said. "Some brambles were already growing there. And I guess I just tried to imagine myself as a raccoon.”

"A raccoon?" his baby brother screwed up his face.

“Mm hmm.” His Dad understood.

“Then I thought about trenches.”

“You thought about trenches.”

"Trenches?" Georgy echoed, although he wasn't sure he knew what the word meant.

“Yes, I did.”

“What the hell could you think about trenches, boy?”

His daddy turned around and walked away, slapping gnats or something off his neck. He scratched the back of his head and turned on his heels and headed back to the stunned boys.

“Well. Let’s go get washed up. Come on boys.” He pushed them ahead towards the house. At the porch he yelled, “Come on Maryse. How about some of that good Cajun lunch?”

“Lunch? It’s early.” Maryse was very worried by this suggestion. Since Marvin’s return, she thrived silent within her household routine. It pulled her discombobulated mind back into its rightful place.

“Lunch.”

“Lunch will be ready at noontime Marv.” She tried to lock into his blue eyes.

“Lunch.” He was looking somewhere else, she couldn’t tell where.

“Lunch can’t be ready before it’s ready Marv. Have an apple.”

“Ok boys, come on, let’s go take care of the apple trees.” And he turned and started walking towards the woods.

Three apple trees had been planted by Grant Slade many years

earlier. Billy Dan's favorite was the smallest one whose branches grew straight up in the light like a pear tree. It was odd-looking, but it gave the most delicious, cracking apples. Georgy liked the one they called 'Big Boy', whose apples were three times the size of the others, and that Mama used for compote.

As they followed their daddy back towards the trees, he stopped and stared at the goat, who was munching on the kudzu. He'd never really thought about the strange vines before.

"Goat seems to love this stuff," he said, absent.

Billy Dan answered him. "Yup, and good thing he does. If he didn't eat it, it would eat us."

"Yeah it would eat us," Georgy echoed.

"What do you mean." It wasn't really a question.

Billy Dan just looked at him. The nine year old did not understand how ill his father was, how far away he was from the family, and from what he was retreating.

"Well that's the kudzu Daddy. We gotta keep fighting it back all the time. In fact it's way too close to them apple trees. We need another goat or something."

"Those apple trees. It's 25 feet away."

"Stuff grows a foot a day Pops, and it sends out shoots faster than that. I'll go get the axe."

"Well maybe we should think this through then. Have you ever looked at it closely?"

Marvin was lucid again, kind of like when he was considering a mass of knots that needed untying. And he was right, William Daniel hadn't thought through this particular problem. So the two of them hacked away at the woody vines a bit and then went to work studying it. They tried to pull up the roots, but this was an old vine, and the roots were very deep and very tough.

Marvin leaned on his shovel. The low-lying branches of the tree in front of him moved gently in the breeze. It helped him to think. Pretty soon, he had a plan. He called his two boys back from where they had been messing around and assigned them their tasks.

In the afternoon the boys exhausted themselves pulling out the kudzu roots about a hundred yards back from the house. The next day father and sons razed the undergrowth, and the third, they felled trees. By the time they finished their project a few days later, they had felled half a dozen trees and set by some good firewood. They had set a bonfire to burn up the kudzu and the underbrush they had cleared away, and the backyard was flooded with light which streamed into the kitchen windows. Maryse chattered merrily.

At lunchtime the following day, Marvin sat down at the kitchen table with his chin in his hands and considered the light. "We should build a fence out back, drive it deep into the ground. It needs to be a solid fence. Take it all the way to the road on both sides. Neither the roots nor the vines should be able to penetrate it.

"We would lose all of the dancing light in my kitchen," Maryse was distraught.

“We want to send the kudzu off somewhere else, somewhere it likes better,” Billy Dan said.

“So what are you doing, imagining that you’re kudzu now?” Marvin chuckled. Maryse did not. "We got wood for a fence, but where do we get the damned hardware?"

“We can take the junk from the Slade place." Billy Dan pointed in that direction. "Screws and hinges and stuff. They can’t do anything with it. We can ask Mrs. Slade if you want to.”

“Not asking anything of Mrs. Slade. There’s kudzu in the junk anyway.”

His Mama spoke loud and clear when she heard that.

“When we came, Grant said we could take whatever we wanted. You use what is there to create what you need Marvin.”

“What the blazes does that mean Maryse?”

William Daniel looked around and knew exactly what his mama meant. Everything was used in that life, every bit of knowledge, every bit of beauty, every bit of trash. That’s what he’d been doing all along, taking pipe, destroyed building materials, wire mesh, red

clay, broken dishes, filthy pails, rocks and half burnt curtains and turning them to use, fashioning them into tables, tomato cages, blackboards, chicken coops, garden plots, flood control, hot houses and pretty garden walls. That's what he had been doing for three years because of his mother's good sense. And suddenly he saw it: there was so much left to do to make this place safe and clean and livable.

Then, in another view, as if from a spot high above the apple tree they called the Big Boy, he saw the thousands of little steps and the millions of little seconds it would take to do all this. He was a boy now, and his daddy was with him. But he knew he would be a youngf man before he carried this through, and he didn't see his daddy by his side.

"I know what she means, Daddy. That's how we do everything out here."

"You are a fine young man William Daniel," said his Mama, "and a great help to your mother just by being here with me."

"I'm here with you too," Daddy said.

"And me too!" Georgy said.

"Yes," said Mama, "here we are. We are here now."

Chapter 19: 2011

Madison sat on the sofa next to Gran Lulu and held her hand. "Here we are," the younger woman said very gently. "We are here now."

Gran was eighty-seven years old and she was having an episode. It just *took* her some days: suddenly, she would be living in the past. A short sentence would come out of her mouth. "*Oh no."* or "*That is not what I meant to do darlin'."* And Madison would know she was somewhere else, with Papa Billy Dan, with her regrets about some mysterious wrong done. And now this time, as she was coming out of it, Lulu recognized that she had been behaving strangely.

"You know Madison, I live in my memory of him, of all sorts of times. Memories of him telling me stories about his past, and memories of him real, right there, next to me. It just comes to get me sometimes."

"Mm. What were you remembering this time Gran?"

"This one was of the time he cracked his rib cutting down a tree, and then that evening he came to see me with his cracked rib at Georgy and Sherry's after the hurricane."

“Mm.” Madison squeezed her gran’s hand.

“He was a man and a boy that day. 55 and 15. He walked into that living room where I was sitting on the sagging red couch and he was looking at me and I didn’t like him looking at me and so he looked away. He asked if I was ok. I noticed that I was relieved to hear his voice. I said 'In a manner of speaking I'm ok.'”

“Ok.”

“He just sat there with us. We all drank ice tea. I had to use a straw. I don’t like straws. My lips were swollen and my lower teeth were loose. He sat. We did not speak. No one spoke. Then after a while he told me we needed to go to the hospital and get some pictures taken.”

The two women sat silently for a bit.

“I live there. More and more I live there. With him.”

Chapter 20: 1963

Wally-Mac McPherson lived there: more and more, he lived there, in his stressed-out gut. In the bowels that twisted and cramped with every new lunchtime, when that "Naf-whateveritwas" lady came to ask about the inquest. It was ludicrous that she continued pushing on him and on the medical examiner to look into her son's death. Everyone knew the body had decomposed, that the evidence was cold, that the Negro was probably dead and buried no matter if they got him cut out of that car or not. It was years ago he died. He wasn't comin' back. You never saw the father strolling in to ask questions. Just her, and always at noon-twenty on the nose. Lunchtime, when he was supposed to have a few minutes to breathe... and in she came again.

And if that wasn't enough, yesterday here comes that ho' Lulu James and William Daniel Bell's lawyer to file charges against his son John. He looked up at the clock in his office. He had an hour before the next assault. What would it be now?

Come atcha?

Come on at me.

That's what you want?

He slapped open the door to the Huntsville PD staff room to see Sal Beaufort hunched over his coffee laughing. The *Andy Griffith Show* was blasting on the TV and Sal was having his daily belly laugh watching those country bumpkin cops.

"Who the hell is on the front desk Sal?"

"Hmm?"

No, Andy go, come on! Come on come on come on!

"Sergeant, I am speaking to you."

"Yes sir."

"Who is on the front desk?"

"It's my break."

"Your break?"

Andy Andy Andy I said come on!!

"Look up Sal: have you found the family dispute report?"

"Uh huh."

"Well why isn't it on my desk?"

Real fast. You can do it.

"Just a minute cap'n. Watch this. I like this part."

"What the hell do you mean 'just a minute cap'n'? I'm not a Goddamned cartoon character, and Huntsville is not Mayberry."

Real fast? What if I hurt you Barney? I'm pretty strong you know.

"Now. Go get the damned file now."

It don't matter how strong you are cause leverage.

Sal looked up and saw that Wally-Mac was serious this time. Sometimes he just let them do whatever the hell they wanted. "Ok. Ok. Ok." The sergeant got up and headed out.

McPherson knew was looking square in the eye at the price he paid for giving his team their freedom right now. Insubordination.

Something crashed on the TV.

Did I hurtcha?

No, of course not!

The Chief went back to his desk and looked at his notes. There was the list, at least it was pretty much the full list. What was wrong with this picture? The victim's name, Louella May James. The TV still blared in the other room.

The alleged assailant's name, John Thomas McPherson. Their address, where they lived together but not in legal wedlock, place the assault allegedly took place: the living room. The injuries inflicted: contusions back, neck, belly and face. Internal injuries. This was getting boring. Broken tooth. Loose tooth. Cuts on lips and face. How did she manage not to get her nose broken? In the photo she had one eye swollen shut. The date and time it occurred. April 27th. It occurred the day of that tornado: that is what was wrong with this picture.

"How the hell did we miss that?" He said it out loud. "How do we know Louella wasn't lying about how she got hurt?"

He needed the precise time and there was no damned precise time.

"Come on Sal! What's takin' you so long?" Wally Mac called into the other room. No one answered. As he stood to walk back into the staff room again, he heard a crash and breaking glass from the television. He was alone with the blaring grey monster.

"Sal? Sal?" He plunked down in a swivel chair and blankly watched the TV.

Andy, you can't just go barging in on people…

That Barney character was always whining.

Yes I can and yes I just did. Stop this right now! Woah!

Wally Mac was transfixed by the dishes flying across the room.

Well hello Andy! It was a big lumpy guy, still holding a chair over

his head

Well hello Andy! said the sweet-faced lady ready to throw another plate.

Hello you two. You know y'all are in a bit of trouble now, now don'tcha?

"Where the hell are you Sal?"

"Back here in the archives. Got it."

She started throwin' things.

"What the hell was it doing in the archives?"

Me!? You broke the chair!!

Stop stop stop stop stop… Andy stood between them and wagged his finger.

"I dunno," Sal said.

Wally Mac started flipping through the papers Thank God they were not married. But it was just as if, and then she starts wearing those low-backed dresses. Running around on him. What does she expect? And with that white trash cheapskate rich crazy bastard William Daniel Bell. What does she expect? What does anyone expect?

I want y'all to simmer down and straighten up.

There you go, you heard him you big mouth Alabama girl.

My big mouth? You big Mississippi baboon!

Why, now, can't you two just try, try, try, try try to get along?

You ever try to get along with a rattlesnake? said the man.

Wally Mac spoke through his teeth.

"Change the goddamned channel."

Sal marched quickly over and flipped the dial.

Five score years ago,a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation...

"What the hell is that?" Sal was frozen looking the plump black man on the television.

…as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.

The Chief muttered through his clenched jaw. "I need to be doin' sumptn else."

Chapter 21: 1923

"I need to be doin' sumptn else." Marvin Bell muttered this over and over again, swiping spiders' webs out of the rafters, and pulling the sticky threads off his fingers.

William Daniel, twelve years old now, stood transfixed at the attic window. Marvin said "Watcha doin?"

This was the last conversation William Daniel and Georgy had with their Daddy and it was going to be about a fox. They'd been clearing the attic out, repairing the roof, making a space for a long low gabled room. William Daniel was looking out from the attic window across the road towards the meadow, and there it was, the most beautiful animal he had ever seen.

"Come see this," Georgy called out to his Daddy.

"Shhh!" Billy Dan hissed.

"Around wild animals or armed men if you want to kill them or observe them, just keep silent and try not to move." His dad was not speaking particularly quietly. "And pray that you're down-wind."

The fox, the sleek dog-sized fox that had stood like a springer spaniel pointing his magnificent tail to the east and his pointed nose to the west, the fox was now a copper squiggle moving fast, deep into the meadow across the way.

"You see him?" Georgy couldn't stop talking too loudly.

"Yeah I see him, tiger."

"Maybe he'll come back."

"No, he won't come back." Daddy was still watching the fox.

"Why not?"

"He just won't tiger. He's through with this place. But you'll be ok without him. Other things will happen, other animals will cross your path."

Their Daddy had been pretty quiet since he got home except when he woke up with a yell in the night. In the previous two years he had grown disciplined like everyone else. Up early, wash up in the kitchen. Cut wood, gather fruit, work in the garden, hack back the kudzu, kill quail, hunt for rabbits, raccoon, an occasional larger game.

About a week after he came back, he had taught Billy Dan to shoot, but he liked to go hunting alone.

The morning they saw the fox, Daddy went out to hunt, and he didn't come back at lunch. Grant Slade's son and his dog came by in the afternoon. The two of them went out to look for him. They found him in the woods. A hunting accident young Mr. Slade said. What sort of hunting accident Billy Dan wanted to know. But the young man didn't answer: he just tapped his foot and looked away.

Chapter 22: 2011 HPD

Police Chief Bart Manville, tapped his foot under his desk and looked out that window and then down on his desk. The office was ratty, but the job was interesting, and this case that Detective Penn was running… that was really interesting. But how the hell to break some information out of such a cold cold situation?

He brought his decaf to his nose and smelled it. It reminded him of the coroner's office. He put the mug back down on the beat-up desk and stared out the window again. He dumped some Dairy-Mate into into the black liquid, ripped open two sugar packets, and stirred with his left hand as he pulled a clean legal pad out of a desk drawer with his right.

He slurped down some of the brew, slapped the pad on the table, and on the first page, he wrote BELL-GARTH 300K in block letters, and started taking down what was on his mind. *"1970 Huntspatch: why did no one notice $300,000 dollars gone missing? Next question: why NOT put the case back in the archives because the statute of limitations for larceny has run out? OR... how to connect it to murder, kidnapping, con-games, or proceeds of crime?"*

Manville's private belief was the cash was connected to organized crime or drug sales. If so, it was proceeds of crime: HPD might just come into a little money. That would be good. His old secretary might know something. Colleen's mind moved a bit

slowly, but she was truthful and wanted to help. He was sure he could help her remember.

The Police Chief breezed by Eugene Penn's desk, tapping him on the shoulder as if the Detective would just stand up and follow. Penn looked up over his shoulder with a helpless expression. A woman was yelling at him on the phone. Manville flashed the cover of his legal pad at Penn, and tapped Ewell Clardy's shoulder: Clardy followed.

"1972? Good Lord Cap'n Bubba, she was only 19 years old!" That was Ewell, always the deep thinking.

"Just be quiet Clardy and let her stop and remember."

"Well. 1972. It is a bit unclear to me, Captain." Colleen was as grey as her hair. She ran her fingernails over her forehead. "That was 50 years ago."

"40." Manville just watched her think.

"Now, that was the year they replaced all the old filing systems." She rubbed her fingers together as if her arthritis were acting up. "I was down in the basement a lot taking files out of cardboard boxes"

"Yes." He watched her memory emerge from her fingers.

"…so they could be put in hanging folders."

"There you go, she don't remember anything." Ewell poked his cell.

"Phone off, Sergeant. Do you remember why you changed the filing system?"

"I wrote a lot of tiny labels and my fingers cramped up."

"Your bleeping fingers?"

"Ewell, shut…up. Excuse me, Colleen? What do you mean?"

"You had to write clear on tiny vertical tabs for the files and it was darned difficult to slide them into the frames."

"Uh huh. But why did you change the filing system?" The chief asked.

"I guess it was because the old one had been a mess for years."

"Ok, but apparently it was a mess that worked," Manville said. "Why change it?"

"I don't know. I guess the new chief just wanted to show he was doing something."

"New chief. That's right, Chief McPherson left in 1972. And you were just transferring files."

"Well, and trying to find some old files"

"You were doing both things at the same time?"

"Well, maybe the research came first." Her hands were moving again, this time in some sort of confusion.

Manville brightened up. That was an interesting piece of information, but even more important, he saw how her mind worked. He knew he could take her through the maze of memory by paying close attention to her body and what she said about her body. As he watched her point and fiddle with her fingers, talk about her aches and pains, he just kept her moving through the story. He learned that as she was transferring those documents, she was also supposed to be looking for affidavits about adverse possession to unused land. And that it hurt her knees. That was interesting too, but again, even more interesting was the way this search made her back squirm, and brought one arm up across her breasts. He brought her through to a memory of McPherson, leaning over her shoulder as she worked. "I was so young," she said. So, this McPherson was still there at the time. So, did she remember the date on affidavits?

"1920's. It was papers about old house in the woods. Kudzu. A place covered with Kudzu. Lord. I can't believe I remember this."

"The mind is a mysterious place, Colleen. So. Why were we looking at the acquisition of this house?"

"Someone big thought it was illegal. Some northerner."

"Some northerner."

"That's what I heard. Or someone from Nashville maybe."

"Nashville's the North," Clardy chuckled.

"Why did they think it was illegal? Do you know?"

"No. Well, now, actually some kid had acquired it, that was the story."

"And some northerner or someone from Nashville found this interesting. Were they the owners?"

"No. I seem to remember they were someone's parents. Or maybe they knew the owners. Or were trying to get in contact with the owners." She was pointing again.

"And yada yada yada." Ewell snickered.

Manville paused and tried to understand what Colleen's pointing was about. "What's off that way?" he asked.

"I don't know? The Arsenal? Fitzsimmons Hardware? I don't know."

The Redstone Arsenal, Marshall Flight Center, Fitzsimmons Hardware, the historical and political heart of Huntsville. A house in the woods. 300k 1970 dollars. This was not clicking neatly together.

"Ok, so, some northerner or someone from Nashville with children found this interesting and so the Huntsville police were doing research on it."

"Well, yeah. And pretty soon the Feds and the CIA maybe? I think."

"The C I fucking A," Clardy brayed.

Manville leaned back in his chair, pulled open the door and hollered toward the other end of the room.

"Eugene come take over from Ewell, would you?" He tried to catch his secretary's eye as he continued. "How did you know that Colleen?" She was off somewhere in her memories.

Now she looked up at him. “Somewhere in there Captain McPherson was gone.”

Ewell was out of the room, and the story wove on, and while it got more detailed it did not get clearer. McPherson was absent, but the replacement was controversial.

“Well, everyone thought that all those other agencies getting nosy about our police chief and about our case was a violation of our jurisdiction. And it was, wasn’t it?” Colleen’s face fairly sang its indignation.

This was 1970’s Alabama politics: a confusion of clans, cronies, the mafia, car dealers and law enforcement. Manville leaned back in his chair: could 300k have been a political slush fund connected to the Fitzsimmons hardware cronies? Or was it mafia money used to pay someone to influence the choice of police chiefs? CIA money that had been misplaced? Not impossible. He jotted a few notes.

The captain poured two cups of decaf and passed one to Colleen.

“Thanks for thinking this through with me Colleen.”

“No problem.”

Colleen looked at her fingers for a full ten seconds before taking that first sip.

“Something’s rattling around in your memory isn’t it?”

“Yeah but I don’t know what. Hi Bertie.”

“Hi Coll. Detective Penn’s out. Sorry.”

“Come in, sit down. We are recording this session. So, take notes if something comes to mind, but don’t talk.”

Bertine sat down, opened her I-Pad and entered her login. Manville looked over at her and felt old.

“So, Colleen. You say there was hot competition at the top of the police department. You know there’s always competition over this sort of job. Sometimes it’s backstage, sometimes it’s up front.

Did you work on the transition?"

"No. Not me. There was some sort of fight. The Feds were all over this city during the transition. They said the NSA wanted to put in its 2-cents."

"You mean the CIA."

"Or maybe it wasn't NSA, maybe it was NASA. Everyone wanted a different chief."

"Why? Who?"

"Not sure I ever knew. It was something about Huntsville being a national security thing."

The captain leaned way back in his chair and watched the ceiling fan click. The Feds. The CIA. The NSA: now their job was to intercept messages on the airways. Huntsville a national security issue? Today, that would be the case. But back in the 1970's, the country's intelligence agencies were having a feud, not even speaking to each other. NASA was thought of as a bunch of high IQ tinkering scientists with a spattering of mad Nazis. Who just happened to get us to the Moon. Colleen looked out the window. Bertine looked at Colleen. The captain stood up.

"So where the heck could $300,000 have come from in this story?"

"Maybe this is not the story. Maybe it doesn't come from this story," Colleen scratched her fingers.

"Maybe not. You are right."

"Or maybe. I mean people said something about one of the guys up for the job, but I knew him. He was nothing. He wasn't mafia…"

The captain raised his eyebrows, but did not look at Colleen. He leaned over and took his legal pad. He took notes.

"What was his name?"

"I don't recall. He ended up in Decatur and then as honorary chairman of something."

"Can't even remember his first name?"

"Hector. Harvey. Hal. Something with an H I guess?"

"What was he?"

"Pardon?"

"Nationality."

"American." Colleen was confused by this question.

"Yeah but American what?"

"I don't know. Italian? Irish? German? I don't know."

"Caucasian."

"Are you kidding? It was 1972. Caucasian," Colleen said.

"Whatever Caucasian is," Bertine snapped.

Manville didn't even hear her say that. He honed in on this increasingly detailed and disorderly picture of what happened in 1972. How could it get messier? He shook his head, and Colleen went on.

"Or maybe that all happened before I started working there.," she mused. She glanced up at Manville and did not like the look on his face. "I am not sure. But Chief McPherson was fired. That I know."

The captain suddenly wondered out loud

"So why was the chief relieved of his duties then? Was he too old?"

Chapter 23: 1965

"Oh! I am *not* too old for music… if it's music." Naphtali was a little upset that her daughters would think 43 was too old for what they were waiting impatiently to hear.

"No you are not!" Her husband patted her soft parts as she headed off towards the kitchen, and she swiped his hand away.

Edwin Reese and his two girls sat in anticipation of something in front of the TV.

"It's the Dr. Pepper Girl dad!" His fifteen-year-old, Mary, leaned into his shoulder. His older daughter, Janine, leaned back into the corner of the enormous green sofa, shaking her head.

"Relax, refresh and enjoy Dr. Pepper."

Naphtali brought in a tray loaded down with pigs-in-a-blanket made from *King David hot dogs* and *Poppin' Fresh Dough*. She positioned it on the coffee table and then headed back into the kitchen for napkins, mustard and root beer. She was not a cook anymore except on Sundays. She knew it was a weakness in the eyes of some, but she kept her home very well. Her husband didn't care and her girls understood that all those years of being everyone's mom and cooking and freezing and bottling and canning had just got the better of her. And she had a full-time job now. Let someone else do the canning.

Nabisco! Makers of your favorite fun cereals and cookies…

"Someone go get the Ding Dongs!" Edwin Reese said.

"And you know who someone is!" Naphtali sighed and got up again. "All they have to do is mention the word, and you want chocolate now."

"James would have been so cool here. He knew everything about music," Mary said.

"How useful is this?" Edwin Reese asked his daughter looking down his shoulder at her.

"Remembering James is always useful Dad." His bright-eyed girl held onto his arm.

Janine, who was nine years Mary's senior, kicked her in the calf and Naphtali arrived with an unopened bag of Oreos, which she tossed to Edwin Reese.

"That's all we've got, sorry."

The discussions with Naphtali and other members of her family about James often upset everyone.

"Y'all gotta find out what happened," the aunts and uncles would say.

"Sue them!" Naphtali's cousin, the lawyer, would say. "Inquest at the very least."

Edwin Reese would stridently remind them that James had been dead these six years, and that they were not helping things.

This evening, in front of the blaring TV, James's daddy had no more patience.

"Let's just stop. Let's stop imagining him spinning on his head in that car. Let's just stop". And at that, the television seemed to blare even louder.

AND NOW, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, ED SULLIVAN! EVERY SUNDAY NIGHT BROADCAST INTO A MILLION AMERICAN HOMES!

*

"God gives you only so much time on earth and you want to surrender hours of it to the boob tube." William Daniel looked down over Lulu's platinum blond curls at the top buttons of her blouse.

"You know God made me in a certain time and place William Daniel."

"Not so that you should disappear into it."

She looked up at him.

"So I should interact with it."

"So in what way exactly are you interacting with the TV?"

"It is interacting with me."

"Yes, it is…It is stealing your time."

On the television, grey curtains pulled back to reveal puppets.

"Shush now."

William Daniel sat back on the sofa and put his feet on the coffee table

Aissera, oje Nanniné, me ne sagliette,
tu saje addó...

"Those are patchwork mice singing Mexican songs."

"Italian. Italian dialect."

"Your brain will rot from this Lulu."

"You know what he's saying? You know what he's saying?"

"Do ***you*** know what he's saying?"

"*Of course* I know. He's saying ' Do you know where I went this evening sweetie? Do you have any idea? I went up there to where your hard heart can't reach me with its ridicule and scorn.'"

"I'm not one to ridicule Lulu Bell. She speaks Italian dialects."

"Hmm. This is not junky TV. This is serious. Please take it seriously"

"The twins would enjoy this." William Daniel said.

"Your boys are probably watching it with Uncle Georgy and Aunt Sherry and the girls right now."

He looked at her out of the corner of his laughing eyes.

"I promise, this is worth it." She could feel her husband's laughter rise in her own belly.

"Worth it." He said, raising one eyebrow.

"Yes."

"What do you mean by worth?"

"How can you ask a question like that and make it funny William Daniel? I mean we're going to hear some real music."

Ladies and gentlemen, Tessie O'Shea

The fat lady started singing but it was not opera:

There's a girl named Tessie Town (oh yeah) And she weighs about four hundred pounds (oh yeah). She's fat and fair, but she don't care. 'Cause the boys all hang around. They call her Two Ton Tessie from Tennessee, Holds ten sweeties upon her knee!

"Well not this."

"This is ok."

"Well."

Lulu reckoned there was something pretty boring about that fat woman on the stage, that four hundred pound woman bragging about all her boyfriends.

"Who gets more for their money, her or them?"

"It's not this, be patient."

"I am being patient. Did I walk out?"

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, THE BEATLES!

“This is it.”

The best things in life are free

“You know that has exactly the same music as 'Two ton Tessie'.”

“No it doesn’t. Same rhythm.” She snuggled up to him and pulled his arm around her shoulder.

"What's this thing called?"

"Money," Lulu answered and finished the line with the singers: *"That's what I want!"*

The song struck William Daniel as some kind of funny, but it just didn't quite sound like music. And these kids with their silly haircuts, well...

“This is deep. Or are you lecturing me again about money?”

“Can you just try to sit back and do nothing but listen? Listen to the music. Just the music. Try sweetie.”

He wrapped himself around her a bit closer.

“Your lovin’ does give me a thrill Lulu. I don't know if it pays my bills, but.” His right hand was playing with the first button on her blouse.

She was laughing and he was moving on her and neither of them noticed when the Beatles’ song stopped. As they wound around one another and lost any sense of where one body ended and the other began, the next act started droning on in the background.

This trick is done with five ordinary playing cards, very low spot cards. 5 ordinary red playing cards. I must have dropped a card.

Confused laughter dribbled from the audience.

“Oops. Where did it go?” whispered William Daniel.

It’s four – ok -- we will do it with 4 cards.

The laughter rose just a little.

"Did I do that? Can I do more with less?"

"I have no idea what you are talking about William Daniel."

"Neither have I."

"Well just keep on doing what you are doing."

I'm going to vanish the card from the left hand and make the left hand ...oh.

"I'm going to make the left hand 'oh', Lulu." whispered William Daniel.

Well then I'll try to do this trick with three cards.

The things happened as they finally always happen between men and women and then the two of them fell asleep together on the narrow sofa for a few minutes and when they awoke the Ed Sullivan show was finished. William Daniel flipped the TV off.

"So the question is, Lulu bell, did you get the expected value out of that card trick?"

"Well, yes."

"The way he just slipped his card away into the deep folds of something?"

"You have a funny way with words William Daniel Bell."

"I am better with money. So, did you get the value you wanted?"

"Yes I did."

"Well that's good. So now tell me what you mean by 'value'."

"A laugh, a surprise and a ***very*** good time."

"Job done, but promise not kept. The promise was a show of dexterity, but he showed us clumsiness."

"There was a great show of dexterity. Like when you do a good rope trick."

"Better?"

"Not better, but like that."

“You are right Lulu Bell. The surprise, the promise kept, the value was in being so mentally and physically nimble, in fact, so discreet, that we don’t expect, or no, we don’t know what we should be expecting.”

"So shall we practice our trick again?” she hummed.

"I don't know about that."

Chapter 24: 1923

Gareth Slade packed Georgy into the back seat of his car and Ben Franklin, Slade's hound jumped into the front seat. That was his spot. They were all going to drive into town to get some people. The doctor or the undertaker or someone. William Daniel was left to deal with his mother alone. "It's ok, y'all" he had said. "Don't worry, we'll be fine."

Right now, Billy Dan +was seated at the kitchen table across from her and it was not that clear that everything was going to be fine at all. He rubbed his eyes, let out a deep breath and ran his fingers through his hair. He focused again on his mama. She was having an episode.

"When there is an epidemic you want to be in the woods" she almost sang the words, "and when there is all sort of crowd-folly you want to be in the woods. This is not a place for superficial people, William Daniel, and a superficial response to it will do you no good at all, no good at all."

His father's body was laid out on the bed in the other room and she didn't seem to know it.

"All will be well with you William Daniel Bell, all will be well."

The tears he had not yet shed felt stuck in his shoulders and his

throat and his nostrils.

"He's dead Mama," He finally rumbled. "Maybe we should get ourselves dressed and wait for the doctor and the undertaker."

"The land turns on people, you know. The land and all that is in it will turn on you."

"Mm hmm." The pressure was building too fast in his neck and his chest. To hold back some sort of disaster within his own body he focused on the material world outside of him. "Maybe you should put on your grey dress. Do you want me to help you?"

"You care for it. You don't master it. It is a work of every day. It is a watchful work and a pruning."

Billy Dan stopped listening to her. He tied her house coat tighter around her waist, pulled her hair out of her eyes, and put shoes on her feet. The two serious men, the doctor and the undertaker, those two intimidating men, and maybe a policeman too, they could show up any minute.

"Ok now. I guess that'll do." The boy stood up and looked her over as she talked on.

"Same as animals. Just like the beasts. You feed them, you milk them, you take their eggs, you shear their wool."

"Come on get a cup a coffee in you."

"I haven't been drinking."

"Come on Mama, can you just carry your weight here? You don't look good. Go get your dress on."

"You help them birth their babies, you help them raise their young."

"Oh f'r criminy's sake. Look at me."

"Don'tcha understand."

"Mama I just said look at me."

The exchange was exhausting, but it seemed that the only way

to get her to do anything at all was to keep her talking to him, and not to herself. Her gaze wandered around the room, and then it fixed directly in his eyes. The look was neither sad nor wild, but urgent. He took both her hands in his and helped her to rise to her feet.

"Come on, put on your dress. Please mama. Just this one thing."

"You're a good son and a fine young man ," she said looking away again. "Where's Georgy? Where's my baby?"

"He and Gareth and Ben went into town. Brush your hair mama."

"Who's Ben? Who is my baby with?"

"Ben Franklin. Gareth's dog. Come on, let's go see if they're drivin up." Maybe if he got her moving, he could shuffle her into the back room to dress. But then she'd see Daddy again. No. He'd bring her dress to the kitchen, keep her standing up there. She really did need to get dressed.

"Yeah the dog. With the dog?" Her eyes were filled with something he could not understand and she stuck out her tongue.

"Put your tongue back in your mouth, mama."

Billy Dan made it through that day. His Mama finally pulled that dress over her head and he brushed her hair as best as he could.

After they got the body to the undertakers, Gareth Slade drove back up there with a ham hock and some dry cakes from his own mama, and a pound of coffee, a pot of beans and a bunch of carrots and six potatoes. The Bells had carrots and potatoes out in the back, but it was a nice gesture.

The doctor prescribed sleeping syrup for Mama, and gave Billy Dan an excuse from school for a week.

The twelve-year-old awakened that night and read from his ancestor's book, Letter ten. And this letter, which he could not stop

reading, reminded him of his mother. His mother with her tongue hanging out and that look in her eyes.

I have heard only of one person who was stung by a copperhead in this country. The poor wretch instantly swelled in a most dreadful manner; a multitude of spots of different hues alternately appeared and vanished, on different parts of his body; his eyes were filled with madness and rage, he cast them on all present with the most vindictive looks: he thrust out his tongue as the snakes do; he hissed through his teeth with inconceivable strength, and became an object of terror to all by-standers.

She was gone too. She was as gone as Daddy.

William Daniel got up the following morning and found everything more complicated than before. Georgy had taken a hike in his head. William Daniel was feeling that everyone was a slug in the house but him. He took his brother out on the porch and pulled his ear.

"It's just bad. Daddy's gone again. Gone for good. Mama's sick. She's here and then disappeared. But don't let it take you over George Bell. Stand up. I need you here with me. We have stuff to do. Get ready for school right now. Lickety split. Wash your face and hands. Where's your satchel? Don't forget to take it with you."

Ms. Slade had said she'd take Georgy for a bit if he wanted, but Billy Dan didn't want. He just wanted his old routine back. He remembered that routine from before Daddy had returned from the war, he could do that. He could do that.

A routine, there was, but a different routine. His Mama just slept. Over time, it seemed there was no point wasting coffee in the morning. He kept the old pot of coffee on the porch in case she asked for it. But she just slept.

Chapter 25: 2011

In the old days, if the alarm didn't go off, Lulu Bell just slept. But with the coming of her great age, sleep was spotty and frustrating, and when she felt her right eye pop open, whether or not light swelled at the window, well, that was the end of it.

Good morning, this is Paula Ashling with ON THE DOLLAR, it's 5:32 in New York and US equities are down sharply on fear of global turmoil. Silver is on the boom however, as prices have soared to a high of 49.91, a price not witnessed since 1980. A steep correction has been predicted by the Elliott.

Lulu had just started the coffee pot and toddled into the living room and stared. She held the remote for a second.

"Billy Dan, Billy Dan, William Daniel, and money will be the death of us all. We will be sucked into a universe of numbers and decimal places, equations and comparative earnings and greed. We will no longer be able to breathe. We will go mad trying to squeeze more money out of …where? Where do we squeeze money out of? Who knows? But we'll keep trying to get more. My God. The death of us all, the death of us all."

She switched channels.

An interview with Asad Ullah on Muslims against Crusades has been

causing a buzz in London.

She pressed the remote control again.

Look I think people connect with me because I'm a smart person, a very smart person. I went to the best school in the world, my uncle taught at MIT, and it so happens that I also have common sense. So, I'm like not going to say there are no good Muslims, cause I'm not a moron.

"Why don't you just accept the fact that you're bald Donald? Good Lord, look at that wispy mess on your head."

This is very serious, this is very serious. You just have to turn on your television to see that this is a problem. I know lots of fabulous Muslims, hardworking, serious people. Magnificent. Some of them are very smart too, like me.

"Hush your mouth, you lying fool. What do you mean you're smart?" She changed the channel.

…allegedly attended many A-list parties with people like Donald Trump, Michael Jackson, the Kennedys, Rockefellers and the Rothschild's, and today he has been convicted as a registered level-three sex offender.

"Why am I listening to this? I'm too old for this." and click.

Prince William and Kate Middleton, the future Mr. and Mrs. Wales, have done a last-minute walk-through of their wedding.

"There. That'll lower my blood pressure."

Lulu went back into the kitchen and put the bread in the toaster and poured herself a spot of orange juice and wiped off William Daniel's portrait.

The future royals oohed and aahed over the beautiful Japanese maple trees brought into the cathedral for the event.

"Ooh; aah; who's singing?" Lulu yawned. "She does look a little like Kate Middleton, my Madison, but without that brittle smile."

Atlanta, Georgia 5:44 this Wednesday morning and we are interrupting our regularly scheduled program for this update from the US Weather

service. A severe weather warning is out for Mississippi and Alabama as a major tornado system has begun to develop.

Lulu sat on the living room sofa with her coffee and toast and zapped again. It was almost a relief to simply follow the progression of this terrible storm. Yes, she thought, it was somehow less stressful than the stew of technical finance, distant violence, infuriating politics and celebrity culture that the television normally offered up.

So unfortunately, that's the way it is in Alabama.

Zapping. That was William Daniel's expression: something you might do on a Star Trek episode. Zap. Change worlds. Zap again. Change worlds again.

That's the way, the way it is continuing being with some storms that are keeping on moving with this front that is on the ground now in Mississippi and Alabama.

"My Lord boy, take a deep breath."

She zapped again.

Currently right now on the ground we're seeing it with you now.

"I can't really tell what you are talking about: ok a big rainstorm; I do not see the funnel cloud"

She zapped again, feeling suddenly very tired.

We pass you on to our main anchor Brian Foster, what are you witnessing going on I mean what have you out there got for us Brian?

She zapped again, sleeping and zapping and listening to the strange unparse-able language of the television commentators:

This is a significant tornado damage situation continuing unfolding in the southwest counties. Sam?

I got to tell you Brian, it's a very interesting day. Let me tell you. If I'm believing this, this is representing what's happening. Big. Very big. Wall cloud. At speeds"

Lulu was snoring and zapping at the same time; her thumb was on automatic pilot every ten seconds. *A very large tornado. Yes, I'm believing it, even here in this place now with you. A very large twisting tornado ripping about.* Lulu was in *The Wizard of Oz,* and she was Dorothy, and the dog in her bicycle basket had Donald Trump's hair and was speaking in this deep and strangely articulated speech. *We can see the wall cloud there is the wall cloud we can't see the tornado continuing being as well as we could before but right now currently on the ground in the light and the brightness that obscures the wall cloud the storm ahs and oohs in the silver singing maple trees we can see debris blowing a man is blowing in the debris and walls and dogs and cars. Sad, so sad.*

She woke up with a start.

"What is life coming to? I am dreaming and sleeping and zapping all at once."

About ten homes have been destroyed in Monroe County. The storm has

The chirpy Barbie-doll co-anchor interrupted him.

Just one second, Brian. We are getting reports of damage in my Twitter account. Several people have witnessed a tornado yeah damage that was earlier with that storm in Madison county and like you say lots of debris!

Lulu slept again and dreamt of William Daniel in uniform, debris flying around him and him holding onto his bright silver radio, trying to keep his feet on the ground. He was sitting for exams now, and time was speeding forward as she watched him write more and more technical things, his handwriting was changing, getting smaller, more precise, more fluid. The wind was blowing debris and the debris was blowing into his handwriting and his handwriting into sound waves, visible sound waves and she was still flipping the remote every ten seconds and telling him how sorry she was. She awoke again, as someone on the TV said

This will be a day that goes down in history.

"I know you! I do know you. You sure have changed since 1972. Lookin' fat, looking tired around the eyes, lookin' red in the face, you smarmy little crap."

Normally, you should have been in a safe place 20 minutes ago. But whatever.

"God this is embarrassing. I am tuned in to the Philip Hawkes's show. First the Donald, now Philip Hawkes. Old age is certain decline."

Be in a safe place right now. Lowest floor possible, central room. Small room, no windows. All we can do is pray for those people. A day that'll go down in history.

"Yeah, this'll be a day that goes down in history, you little squealing phony. That's the first time I have ever heard you sound vaguely sincere. But I don't believe you any more than I believe that Holy Roller with the hair-sprayed beard on channel 126! How the hell did you ever get out of jail and onto the TV? You God damned con-man."

It's moving right into downtown Tuscaloosa. March 21st 1932 was the last time we saw that. Ok we'll go ahead and pop that image up. We see rotation. There's the debris cloud. There's stuff flying. That's big stuff flying

As the doorbell rang, Lulu took another swig of her coffee which was cold now.

Be in a safe place. What exactly can you tell me…

She turned the sound down and looked through the peep hole and spoke loud as she was unchaining and opening the door.

"Well hello Madison, what are you doing out in this weather?"

"Time to come with us downtown."

"Well bless your heart. To your house?"

"Yep. We should have planned better for this. 122 tornadoes have already hit within 50 miles of here. Come downtown. It's not anywhere near tornado alley."

"Am I near tornado alley?"

"Yes. Let's go."

"Well, bless your heart for thinking of me Maddie. Now. Now, you think so?" Lulu turned off the television. "Well, we'll spend a little time together, that'll be nice. Let me just get ready."

"Let's go let's go! Get your bag. Get your out of your nighties and throw them into an overnight bag. Grab an extra pair of necessaries. Slip on a dress and get into a coat. No time to do your face. You can do all that when you get to the house. AND NOW, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN! We are doing this NOW."

Chapter 26: 1924

In 1924 the streets of downtown Huntsville were still runnels of mud and rock. Billy Dan kept one eye on Georgy as they stood on the wooden sidewalk and waited for a parade of slow trucks to pass. Where were they all going? He found himself reading a newspaper article posted in front of Fitzsimmons's Tobacco, Hardware and Haberdashery. He sometimes read things just because they were in front of his face. The headlines shouted:

Dress well and Succeed! Don't wait for a suit to wear out: you will not get that promotion.

He read these lines aloud and continued to the newspaper article below it.

'The way for you clothiers to create more sales is to create more needs or wants in dress,' said Alfred S Bryan at the National Association of Clothiers and Furnishers, 'This is the future.'

"'*The artificial Wants of Mankind have become more numerous than the natural*.' Ben Franklin said that Georgy. Don't you forget it." Georgy wasn't listening; he was sniffling and coughing behind his homemade mask. Their mother, still afraid of the black flu, had sent them to the doctor. William Daniel kept reading the poster. These ideas just worked on him. He never before had given a single

thought to what he wore. **…clothing for the motorist."**

He couldn't stop reading this thing.

Also sportswear, gloves and a wide variety of dust-wear are needed by the modern man of means.

"*Modern man of means.* Why listen to that? And in Huntsville y'all don't need dust-wear y'all need mud-wear." He was talking to himself. He didn't normally do that, but something about that poster just got on his nerves. "It wouldn't sell so well. *Comfortable, loose-fitting mud-wear and gentlemen's ha-berdashery, for y'all's drive in the big city*."

Georgy pulled William Daniel's arm until it nearly snapped.

"Look at that gigantic dog! That's a Wolfhound isn't it?" Georgy reached out as if to touch a dog in the back seat of a passing roadster.

The car with the amazing dog passed, swerving ever so slightly to the right; it splashed mud on the two boys.

"He did that on purpose!" Georgy shouted glaring at the car as it rumbled away. William Daniel had to hold tight to his brother's hand to keep him from running after it.

They finally stepped off the curb and started into the street avoiding the puddles at about the same time a yellow automobile turned a corner. It headed towards them not fast enough to patiently wait for. So William Daniel didn't. When the car honked and slammed on the brakes, William Daniel stopped in his tracks and leveled a look at the well-dressed boy behind the wheel. The young driver stopped, pulled off his goggles and then pulled them back down and honked once more, as if to get back his courage.

"White trash!" he shouted as he drove away.

William Daniel had never wanted to hit anyone in his young life, but right then, he could have pulled that skinny rich punk out of his car and beat the tar out of him in the muddy runnels of Main Street.

Chapter 27: 2011

It was like runnels in her mind. Lulu was telling these same stories over and over again.

“He told me about those first years in the woods, those years of living with snakes, the years of getting to know snakes and of keeping them away from his mother.”

It had started about three months before, maybe around that time she had to be evacuated during the hurricane. Maybe. First, it was bits of stories that she knew damned well she was repeating, and she would say "I said that before, didn't I?" "Yes you did," everyone would tell her. Then she stopped noticing that she was repeating herself.

Today, Lulu and Madison were having their Sunday brunch on the patio in front of the perfect turquoise swimming pool and the perfectly mowed lawn on one of those oppressive and muggy July mornings in Huntsville. It was going to storm, and they were going to have to run inside. The perfect morning was sure to be blown about with leaves from the woods in front of them, and the swimming pool would no longer be a turquoise jewel, and the sound of the water pounding down on the roof would quiet their conversation.

“It was so hard on him Madison," Lulu set her pretty brunch plate on the kitchen table. "‘cause he loved his mother so much. So hard on him ‘cause they were so poor. And ‘cause he couldn’t help her. Couldn’t help her. All he could do was make his money and save it. Build a life for them all without spending a penny. He rebuilt that cabin you know?”

“Yeah I know. Want more coffee?”

“No, thank you darlin'. He just wanted to help his mama. He was independent and barely weaned, barely weaned all his life. All his life he was like that.”

Madison didn’t answer. She looked out the sliding glass window, across to the woods. She had heard this same story so many times. The same words repeated, as if it were an oral tradition she was supposed to remember and pass down.

“He just became obsessed with money Madison. He had to be weaned of it, one way or another.”

The story was burned into Madison’s mind because it was burned into Lulu’s mind. The elderly lady kept saying it. For Madison, these bare words unfolded into a hundred other stories she had heard on other Sunday mornings. But with time, for Lulu, the rest of the story, well something seemed to have whittled away at it, and only the core remained.

“Did you know you can eat snake?”

“Yeah I heard that.”

“Papa Billy Dan ate a lot of snake in his day. Didn’t cost him a penny. That was their livestock he used to say.”

Gran had taken to telling Papa Billy Dan’s story every time they spoke. Madison listened and wondered how much of this her Gran really remembered and how much was just runnels in her mind, like a soft irregular path of worn stones in an old church. Communion used to take place here. Millions of trips had been made up this path, heartbeat slowing, warmth within — knowing that what was important was being part of William Daniel’s story.

“He was so calm, almost all the time. So level-headed Madison. He would wrap his arms around you, and the world was steady.'

"I remember. I do. I remember."

"Wasn't always the same man in his most private world, though, you know? Y'all know he could be cheap. Had to be. Built a life from scratch without spending a penny. He rebuilt that cabin with his bare hands."

"Mm hmm." Madison felt a sigh rise in her chest.

"But sometimes, sumptn just rose up from within, like red hot lava, peeking up, bubbling up from underneath. He became eager about money. I wouldn't call it greed. But eagerness, like an animal eager for its food. And when that happened, I worried for him, and I did everything in my power to steer him in another direction. Then it would subside, and we all would forget it was there. Y'all didn't see that part, didja?”

"I don't remember seeing that, no."

Pictures of this lean, tall man with his long face and obvious silence sat in the kitchen windowsill, in the light. Every time she and Lulu toddled over to finish up the dishes, Lulu finished by slowly wiping dry the photos in warm circular motions. And then she would say:

“He could be really talkative you know? But he just didn’t say anything unless he had something to say.”

“Yeah, that I remember.” Madison took the dishtowel from the elderly lady’s hand and hung it to dry.

“His Mama was really not happy about the snakes. She went outside and lost her lunch when she saw the place the first time.”

Madison broke into the monologue she knew was coming up with a question she had always wanted to ask.

“Did she have a nervous breakdown?”

She was not expecting the sudden burst of clarity that followed.

"Well, no. Not right then. Later *on*, of course. But at that point she did despair."

"She did."

"She did. But then, everyone does from time to time."

"Despairs."

"And I would even say that's a good thing. It wakes you up. The question is, how long does it take you to stand back up and get to it?"

"Gran, did Grandad's house in the woods end up getting eaten by the kudzu?"

Gran looked suddenly a little afraid.

"I don't know. I should remember. Probably. Yes, probably."

"Was there a fire in it? Did it burn down or something? Did his Mama set fire to it?"

"Um. No. I don't think so. I am sorry Maddie, I just don't know. There were snakes though. Did you know you could eat snake?"

Chapter 28: 1966

"You can eat snakes, you know." Young Philip said it just to get a rise out of his step-mother.

“Go play with your friends.” the blond responded, sniffling.

He said nothing at all.

“Go play with your friends!” the blond shouted now.

“Yeah, I heard you.” He spoke without looking up.

“Go play with your friends Phillip!!”

What a fucking screecher she was.

Tiffany, the latest Mrs. Jason Hawkes, was nearing some sort of a stupid breakdown, whining and sniffling and trying to fasten her blond hair into a French twist all at the same time.

The beautiful twenty-something stewardess had screamed at Nanny Cristina (Mr. Hawkes called her “the governess”) for insubordination because she was watching some racial riots on TV instead of making lunch for the boy and her. Cristina quit on the spot. Tiffany was stupid but he wasn’t allowed to say it. So, he shut up and walked out the front door into the wall of Nashville heat.

Standing on the steps of his father's neo gothic mansion, fifteen-year-old Philip surveyed the front garden. There was Pete, the old black gardener, hose in hand. Was he talking to the trees? Jefferson, who was responsible for the cars, was off today. For a second, Philipp thought maybe he would slip into the garage, grab the keys and take a joy ride in the Bentley. But with the state the blond was in she'd probably call the police. He really couldn't give a shit if he never saw the governess *or* Tiffany again. So. *Go play with your friends? What did that mean?* The closest thing to a friend Philip had was Trent. When they were eight years old, Trent had refused to break into the school teacher's house with him to steal an Indian head penny. But he had waited outside while Philip went in, and then kept the secret.

Trent Benson lived "next door" a person might have said; but it was a long walk down that immense horseshoe driveway, along half a mile of sidewalk-less street in the August heat to the other immense horseshoe driveway, where the hike up a 7% grade left a kid breathless and empty of the angry enthusiasm that had inflated his sails at the beginning of the adventure.

In the past, to avoid the spontaneous and exhausting exercise of desire, the parents determined – or rather the nannies Cristina and Magdalena had determined together – that four days a week, the driver would drop nanny and child off at one home or the other and wait a couple of hours until the "play date" had exhausted itself. During this time, drivers and Nannies would flirt vaguely and the boys would do whatever little boys do. They were both eight when the ritual began, and fifteen by the time Cristina quit and the system fell apart.

It was about time the system broke down. By 1966, the entire point of these meetings was to give the nannies and the chauffeur respite from their boredom. The kids were stimulated, said Cristina, by someone from their own sphere. But that was bullshit. Neither young man understood why he still had a nanny.

Now, Philip's dad had considerably more money than Trent's dad and considerably more wives, but the two boys were from the same class, more or less. Mr. Hawkes approved.

The extraordinary wealth of Mr. Hawkes left endless possibilities for playing with expensive and more or less taboo things. For as long as the system held on, part of the play date at Philip's house was spent on tours of the forbidden areas of the Hawkes family wealth. *Come play chopsticks on Napoleon's piano. Let's set a fire in crazy King George's fireplace. This is a real set of armor: shall we take it apart and put on the helmet? It's 400 years old. You wanna see a naked picture of my new step-mom? Shall we smoke an incredibly expensive Cuban cigar? I could cut your finger off with this cigar thing you know. Here put your finger here, I'll show you. Don't tell Cristina I said that. She gets mad when I make gory jokes.*

The day his Cristina quit, when Philip finally arrived exhausted in front of Trent's place, instead of going to knock politely at the door and dealing with the huge butler or the skinny black housekeeper whose dialect he couldn't understand, he decided to throw rocks at Trent's bedroom window. After about the third rock, Trent came loping around the house.

"Hey! What are you doing?"

"Done! There you are."

"Were we supposed to do something today?"

"Cristina quit and stupid Tiffany told me to go play with my friends."

"I'm on the basketball court. Come on."

Chapter 29: 1925

"Well, come on," his Mama's voice said, stepping up the stairs.

William Daniel was preparing shoes for September, taking apart his Dad's insoles: Two pairs of army issue boots would go a long way. He could wear one pair now although he needed to put newspaper in them because they were too big. Georgy would take Billy Dan's old pair. Billy Dan was reconstructing them for the hard wear of fall and winter.

"Gillian Slade is saying that maybe we would be better off at the Madison poorhouse William Daniel." His mother's voice broke into the quiet rhythm of his work. He hadn't even noticed that Gillian had arrived in her noisy automobile.

"What?"

"Or maybe you and Georgy could get a job at the Lowe Mill. They're hiring. Or maybe the old Merrimack cotton mill."

There was Gillian, in the attic room with them, uninvited. His mother was just dismayed and confused. Gillian could see it. Billy Dan stood up.

"What?"

"So we could pay the rent."

"What rent?"

"The rent like everybody little man." Gillian was looking about an inch over his head.

"Well Ms. Slade, we already pay rent by paying the tax man every year when he comes by. Don't we?"

She narrowed her eyes to slits looking at the boy.

"And we take care of y'all's animals. Wasn't that the agreement?"

"Ain't my animals. And taxes, that's not rent." There was a silence. "I can arrange for the state to put y'all in the poorhouse you know."

"Why, after all this time." Maryse was shaken and sad. "I thought we were friends, Gillian. Your father was a friend. Your brother was a friend of mine."

"We are friends, in a way, Maryse. But those men have died. And it would be friendly for you to pay me rent."

"What are you asking for?" asked Maryse

"Ten dollars a month."

"That's a lot of money Gillian."

"Hmm. Well it's reasonable for us to be earning something from our family property."

"Who will pay the rent AND your taxes Miss Gillian? I mean if we don't?" The boy spoke up.

"Hmm."

"I'll find five a month for you, no problem," said Maryse.

"7.50"

"6. Final offer. It'll take you a year to find someone to rent this, and they won't pay you 5." William Daniel sounded so sure of himself that his mother was shocked.

"I'll bet I can find someone to take this place lickety-split, little man."

"Well, maybe you can." Maryse stepped between William Daniel and Gillian. "Even living out here so far from town." Maryse pulled herself together for a second. "And then if you decide to do that, we will be making our arrangements. Billy Dan go get Ms. Slade her first month's rent."

"And if we go, we will be taking our improvements and our animals with us, you know Ms. Gillian. Cause they ain't yours, that's what you just said. The end of chickens and eggs. The kudzu will do what it wants." He counted out the six dollars in six piles of coins. He had to count it twice to satisfy her.

The problem was temporarily solved, but something had to be done in order to stay unknown by the authorities and out of the poorhouse. William Daniel no longer trusted the Slades to keep their word. He and Georgy had seen people wandering around downtown Huntsville from that alms-house. They were haggard and grey and one of them was barking mad. Scared the pants off Georgy. That was not going to happen to the family.

William Daniel went into school as usual Monday morning, not sure whether he should be confident or not. He knew that his presence there had always been to calm his mother's nerves more than anything. Whatever they were doing in the classroom he could do falling down a mine shaft, except draw pretty pictures and write with prim handwriting. He knew his marks were always almost perfect, despite a certain lack of standard method and clear handwriting. Still, he wasn't too sure he could make an honest argument of it. He wondered if maybe he should figure out some sort of a lie to convince her. But this made him even less sure of himself.

His teacher this year and last and the year before was Miss Nora Spencer, a vigorous and forthright young woman of six and twenty. He would just say what he had to say and hope for the best. If she didn't agree, well, he'd just have to play hooky until someone caught up with him.

After all the children had hustled and bumped themselves out of the schoolhouse and poured shouting and laughing into the public square, William Daniel stayed in the room and helped to wipe

down the boards and clean the erasers and move the tables around. As the room was nearly tidy, he cleared his throat.

"Miss Spencer, Ma'am, I'm going to have to start working."

She just looked at him.

His Mama was ill, he explained. Someone had to take care of Georgy and keep him in school. And the owner of the house they lived in was asking for an impossible lot of money. Could he do some work at home and bring it in every Friday to prove that he was studying? She knew he was a good student: she could test him he said. The first week he didn't bring in the work she could turn him in he said. Miss Spencer was astounded; she didn't answer directly.

"Miss Spencer...?"

"Did you know I was an Alabama suffragette?"

"No, ma'am, I didn't. But I don't think I know what that means."

"Well young Mister Bell, I was one of the women who fought to get the vote and who continue to fight to keep it in this crazy Great State of Alabama."

"Yes ma'am."

"And I am also one of the women who is fighting so children like you.."

"I am thirteen, I am not a child. I'll be fourteen soon."

"Children like you can have a childhood and not be slaves in cotton mills. So that children like you can grow up and know how to read and write and"

"I can already do that."

"And do something worthy of your talent."

"Well, I don't know about that."

"Well I do. Why doesn't your Mama do that work again?"

"She's been sick since my Daddy died. Since he killed himself, I think."

Miss Spencer was quiet for a second. She put her books down on the table and walked over to him.

"You think."

"Well no one really said it."

"My." She brushed his hair out of his eyes.

"Adults lie to children you know."

"I do know."

"Miss Spencer, you know I don't need to come to your classroom to do the things we are doing. I can do all that."

"I do know."

"And I can prove I can do it. And if you tell me what's happening when I come to see you, I can learn new stuff too. I learn quick. And I do what I say I'm gonna do. You know I do."

"I do know. My lord, life is a battle, even for a little man like you. Well. Use your noggin' to find something decent to do. Stay away from the cotton mills. Do your homework. Be careful with your handwriting. We will meet for 45 minutes after class gets out on Fridays. Georgy can wait here for you. We'll see how long we get away with it."

Chapter 30: 2011 HPD

Ewell Clardy leaned over Eugene's shoulder and watched whatever was going on on that I-Phone.

"What the hell you watchin?"

"It's called CIVIL WAR."

Once you finish all the cups of the other team, you have to do a bounce shot into the middle of the Ping-Pong table to win the game.

Fill your beers guys.

"You are watching a bunch of college kids get drunk on YouTube?" Ewell was riveted to the images on the phone. "Don't you wish you went to college Eugene?"

"Fuck you."

"That's a different YouTube."

"You know, I need you two to use your gentlemen mouths." Bertine was matter of fact about it. But the two men broke out into laughter that sounded like wheezes. "And Ewell, y'all get off Eugene's back."

"Thanks, affirmative action woman, but I don't need your help." Penn was still holding his sides.

"She did go to college dumbfuck, you do need her help. Ok, I cannot read your handwriting on this IO form, Geney boy. Model lcia mot. What are you, writing in Chinese now?"

"Kia motors. It's not Chinese, it's Korean." Eugene said.

"Eugene is not stupid, he's just livin' in the past," said Bertine to no one in particular.

Eugene Penn wheezed with laughter again.

"Well, thank you for your confidence Sergeant Bertine. The past is such a lovely place, don't you think Ewell?" He grabbed the paper from Ewel's hand and wrote "Kia Motors" in big bold letters.

"And sometimes he thinks he's funny when he's not." Bertine winked at him.

"She likes you Eugene."

Bertine sighed and stood up. Eugene found himself eyeing the third button of her blouse. He looked away, but it was difficult: was she beautiful? What a strange thought. He shook the idea out of his head and went back to his YouTube.

She grabbed her file and headed out of the staff room as the captain was coming in.

"You're not going anywhere Sergeant. I need to speak to you people. What the hell are y'all doing? Penn, turn off your personal phone. What's with The Case Number Assignment Log today guys?"

Everyone stirred, but no one had the log.

"Some days I feel like I'm on *The Andy Griffith Show*. Who's on it? Clardy, IO Reports please. Bullard, arrest report for whoever's lawyer has been harassing Colleen. Some guy accused of holding up the bank when it was closed? What the blazes is that about?"

"Guy decided to hold up First National but forgot to read the

opening hours posted on the door. It's closed at lunch. He got there in his ski mask, gloves and 9 mm and was really pissed off and started slamming on the door with his gun. Which is when me and Bullard happened by." Ewell laughed and slapped his knee.

"I bet you weren't laughing when it happened," interjected Bertine.

"You were shittin' your pants," Eugene said.

Ewell and Bullard spoke almost at the same time.

"Fuck off Penn."

"Detective Eugene Penn, can you just control your mouth? In fact, control your mouths all of you. Anyway, how did I miss that story?" The Captain shook his head. "That's one for the books. Ok, so. Colleen says you guys are ignoring her admin requests. I shouldn't have to be talking to you about this. We also need to update last night's Patrol Log she says. Where are the Property and Evidence Receipts please?"

"*We can lick gravity but sometimes the paperwork is overwhelming.* Werner Van Brown said that. N't that good?" Eugene chuckled and tapped his I Phone screen.

"Wernher Von Braun." Bertine corrected his pronunciation. Eugene just shook his head.

"You take everything as an opportunity to teach Sunday School, don't you?"

"Have you thought, Ewell, to get a Miranda Waiver Form from the person in interview room one?"

"Hey check this out!" Eugene said. "*Men's Journal* has selected Huntsville as one of the best places to live in America."

"No."

"Yup."

"Phone off, Eugene."

"The best place to keep your brain in shape. Space centers, scientists, scientists' families."

"This is the place for you, Eugene, you flabby bald-brained redneck!" Ewell could not miss an opportunity to insult his bald colleague.

You'd think they would have grown used to this sparring. But sometimes they just cracked. This time Eugene turned around and punched Ewell in the solar plexus without even standing up.

"What the hell are you doing Penn? Step back Clardy. Step back and away." The captain spoke in an even tone. "This is over boys."

"Ewell, your problem" shot Bertine "is that one day you will wake up and find out that Eugene is a hell of a lot smarter than you, and you will be embarrassed."

"There goes the affirmative action girl again. She is in love, Eugene, I'm telling you."

Manville smacked his flat hand down on the desk.

"Quit calling Sergeant Kobehi affirmative action girl. Just stop it. And take care of your damned paperwork gentlemen. I don't care about your love life, your private life or your politics. But to make an exception, in this incredibly tense situation, Happy Birthday Eugene." He fairly shouted the last three words.

And on that note, Ewell stood up and headed out. The captain corralled him back into the room. Colleen walked in with a Baskin Robbins ice cream cake inscribed "Happy Birthday to our favorite Neanderthal." The room broke out in laughter and in song and Ewell did not make a sound.

"Sorry no birthday present."

"Of course there's a birthday present Captain!"

Bertine pulled a fat wrapped package out of her desk drawer. Ewell howled with laughter.

"Have a look Eugene, ignore him. Open it."

Eugene held the package in his hands looking at it like it was the first gift he had ever received in his life. He held it in his hands and considered it.

"I don't know what to say."

"Just open it Eugene you Neanderthal!" someone said.

"Shut up. He'll open it," Bertine answered.

"Now they are both in love. A couple of years ago you two would be lynched you know."

"You watch your fuckin' mouth or you're gonna be asking how life got so bad for you so fast." Bertine looked straight at Ewell.

There was a deafening silence as everyone turned to look at her, and then after a beat Penn said:

"So, are you a nice Christian girl or a Black Panther?"

"There are limits," she said. "There are limits."

Eugene carefully inched off the ribbon and edged open the tape. A hardback slid out onto the table. *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Eugene looked a bit confused, and held the coral covered book in his hand, weighing it, running his hand over the book jacket cover. He opened it and slowly turned the pages. Ewell was holding his sides laughing.

"He is gonna bawl!"

"Ol' Bama is gone Eugene," Bertine said. "The past is gone, praise God. Enjoy the book."

When she walked into the coffee room with her hands full of paper plates and plastic forks, Manville shook his head and looked up from his coffee.

"Why do you even talk to him like that? You know I spend my time controlling his racist tendencies Bertine."

"All y'alls a bit racist." She rinsed the plasticware piece by

piece and then set about washing it. "Eugene is no more than the rest of you."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. Well you can't really help it can you? I can't put my finger on it with Eugene though. He's tryin' to fit in with someone. And man, oh man, he does not fit in at all."

"Any way you look at it, Sergeant, he's not going to like what he reads in there."

"Nobody likes what they read in there. But everyone loves the book. That's the trick."

Manville leaned on the counter and sipped his coffee, as if this were the first time he had relaxed since he took the job. He must have spent 2 full minutes just breathing, not talking. He listened to Bertine as she finished the dishes, putting each plastic fork and knife silently in the drawer, each coffee cup in the cupboard.

"Ntcha ever notice that you can't tell if he's serious or not?" Bertine said.

"Didn't I say that to you your first day?"

Colleen walked in with pink cheeks and wide eyes.

"What's the matter Colleen?" The captain dreaded disaster.

"I just remembered who the adverse accession to property was about."

"That's good, that's useful, so spit it out, who was it?"

"Bell. Mr. Bell. Madison Bell-Garth's granddaddy. And the Slades. He took the property from 'em when he was a boy. 1928? A kid. I didn't know who he was when all this investigation stuff was going on, so it didn't really strike me as strange."

"But it was."

"It was. And some kid had taken some of his money or something that year."

"Which year?"

"1972. I think. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. It was so long ago, you know?"

"That's fine, Colleen. That certainly is an odd piece of news. Will you get the originals on that acquisition and anything you can find on that theft out of the archives then? Odd piece of news indeed."

Chapter 31: 1968

This was an odd piece of news. Trent was not outstanding in math or particularly interested in school. So, when his father announced to him that evening that he would have a spot at MIT, he didn't even know what to say. It didn't matter, because his Dad did not linger for a discussion. The door to his bedroom closed, and Trent, stunned, did not have the time to think about what it meant before his body reacted. He jumped to his feet and headed to see his buddy next door.

He was out of breath when the large red door opened and a housekeeper pointed him to the winter garden. He would have known anyway: the television was blasting.

There was still a life-sized portrait of Tiffany Hawkes in the entryway. She was pretty but dumb-looking, thought Trent. And long gone. He wondered why number five allowed it to remain. Maybe she didn't know who it was, was that possible?

Trent felt the acceptance letter in his varsity jacket pocket. Why was Philip the first person he was telling? Over the years, Trent kept up his side of the friendship with young master Hawkes, but he had no idea why. He could have told his steady girl. She'd probably be irritated if she learned she wasn't the first to know. But he

had to tell his buddy with all the money and all the beautiful step mothers. Philip wouldn't be particularly nice about it: that was for sure. He had remained squat and sarcastic as ever.

Philip was sitting in front of the television with an arm around Linda Petteway, his latest "non-girlfriend" when Trent pushed the door open. Phil didn't hear exactly what Trent said because the television was speaking.

I tell you the way mini-dresses are everywhere today I could never get married looking like this. My knees are bony.

"What?"

"I said MIT."

Now I am married. Got him, you know. But afterwards it's not what you think. I feel like that song from the roaring twenties: There's the moon, way up high, Here are you, here am I, Oh do, do do something!... Maybe it's the knees.

"Turn it off," ordered Philip. Linda reached for the remote control, but she didn't know how it worked. "Just press that button. No here, give it to me. I thought you were going to Vanderbilt. You're going where?"

"Yeah, MIT. Go figure. Dad told me."

"Did you apply?"

Linda switched the television on again.

No one thinks about a man's bony knees you know. Least of all him. He's interested in you, he doesn't know you, it's not his bony knees that are gonna stop him. He'll get on that phone, call a complete stranger. Your mother answers, he'll try to seduce her. Why is that?

"What are you doing, practicing using the remote? Turn off the television. That's just a rerun anyway." He grabbed the remote and pressed a button, switching channels instead of turning it off.

From the BBC, we have this flash report:

Paris: The worst street fighting in the capital of France since the liberation from Nazi troops in 1944.

"Did you apply?"

"Looks like he applied for me."

"Paris!" Linda was distressed. "The most romantic city in the world and look at that! They are burning trash cans on the street. And cars! They're burning cars!"

Philip ignored Linda and Linda looked up at Trent.

"So, is this good news or bad?" she asked.

"Good news. Gotta be good news." Trent didn't look at her, and did not seem convinced. But what was he going to do?

"They are going to roast you at MIT," Philip snickered. "Well, I'm going to Haavaad."

"Not the same thing." Linda was unimpressed.

"Unless I ask my dad for something else." He looked at her sideways.

The strike began as a protest against the war in Vietnam, but by six p.m., the streets were filled with people from every walk of life: students, postal workers, artists, communist party agitators, civil servants and blue-collar workers. But where is it going? Till the early hours of the morning, students were meeting to plan their next moves. The question remains: is this a coordinated strike, or a mass of separate demonstrations?

Closer to home, there have been violent protests by MIT and Wellesley student and faculty activists against military-related research on the MIT campus.

Linda suddenly focused her green eyes on Trent, and blurted:

"I think it's outasight Trent. I don't know anyone who's going to MIT. Everyone goes to Harvard. I'm going to Wellesley. We'll see each other during vacations, right?"

The remark struck Trent as weird: he ignored her. He didn't

really like her. She flipped the channel again and there was the image of somewhat bloated, smiling Hubert Humphry. What would anyone want with such wimp, she thought. The image on screen was a photo, not a film. She had not quite realized it before the image changed to the electoral campaign logo : HHH.

Chapter 32: 1927

HH Industries was one of the country's first manufacturers of vacuum tube hearing aids, a bulky and expensive contraption that used telephone technology to allow the very wealthy hard of hearing to follow a conversation. William Daniel was relieved to land there in 1924.

Because it was a very high-tech industry for the early century, the staff was made up almost entirely of adult men who either had some training in engineering, a meticulous attitude toward their work or some special talent for innovation. No untrained assembly line workers were hired. A few non-technical men did work in shipping and accounting and a couple of ladies handled the secretarial work.

By 1927, young Bell had been nearly three years at HH Industries and he enjoyed those years. The company was his new life. His home routine had receded into the frame of his existence. Georgy was now away to school seven hours of the day and was old enough and big enough, though not quite mature enough to take on some of their Mama's work in the house and kitchen garden. William Daniel still made his way home at lunch to check on her. It made for long lunches, but it was ok. Mr. Hunt did not object: the old man knew more than he revealed about the young Mr. Bell's situation. William Daniel fulfilled his obligations at work and at

home, and fulfilled them well.

The first six months in HHI, he was a gofer. Gofer wire, gofer coffee, move things from one department to another. Clean out some kudzu. Then one day the shipping department needed some help tying a number of crates onto the same truck. They didn't know a thing about knots. He taught them how to tie a double Carrick bend. He hadn't done that in a while. After that they were very friendly.

By that fall, he was told that, when he arrived every day at eight a.m., he needed to go to see Mr. Hunt's secretary for his daily assignment. It changed nearly every day, which suited him fine. "Go help the packers" was a pretty common one. Or else "Do something about the plumbing in the boss's bathroom." "Help Miss Pritchard proof the accounts." "Drive this to the post office and drop off a pouch at the bank."

He learned to drive early and that was a privilege.

Then one day, Miss Pritchard said to him:

"The boss wants you to reread this letter for him this morning."

"Ok, but your spelling is better than mine."

"Think about the argument he said."

"Uh huh. What's that mean?"

"See if you can find a better way to say things? Really, honey, I'm not too sure. Take a pencil and a paper and start working on it, and when he comes out, I will check what he means."

The letter began,

Dear Mr. Arnold,

In application of the law of the Great State of Alabama regarding adverse possession of land, I inform you that I, Herbert Hunt am suing to acquire the land described as follows:

Beginning at a point 57 ft. North of the NW corner of the Herbert Hunt

lot on the East side of Lee Highway, and running North along the East boundary of N. St. Andrews Road, 32 ft., thence East 122 feet; thence South 60 feet; crossing the so called "Lee's Creek" in two places.

I expect to be able to take possession of this land, which I have been clearing and using for parking for the last seven years based on your bad faith refusal to clean up the kudzu which invades my property and your further refusal to control the river bed which is on your territory and which regularly floods my land.

When the tax assessor came by my offices last week to state that the property would be sold to pay for back taxes, I paid the 15 years back taxes on that property and received a tax deed in exchange. I have no interest in taking full possession of this land, however, only of that part of the land which is causing me work and costing me money.

I therefore would like to ask you to call my attorney, Mr. Paine, in Huntsville so that we can arrange a settlement on this problem.

I give you 15 days from the date of this letter to contact him and settle, or else I will have to ask you to surrender all the property.

Etc etc.

He put the letter down, and walked into Miss Pritchard's office again.

"Can I talk to Mr. Hunt?"

"Not right now."

"Did you ask him what he meant?"

"He didn't come out."

"Have you got a copy of the law?"

"What law? I'll ask him?"

"When will you ask him?"

She raised her eyebrows, so he went back to his table.

He looked long and hard at that paper. His Mama had paid Mr. Slade's back taxes and a small lien when they moved in, and then paid the taxman every year. His Daddy had complained about that repeatedly. William Daniel hadn't actually seen a tax deed, or any other sort of paper, but he had heard the story often enough. They had paid rent for one year. And then, after an argument between Gillian and her surviving brother, none of the Slades had come anywhere near their property in 3 years. Not even for eggs. Not even for corn.

The Bells had almost completely renovated the entire house with the sweat of their brow. They had managed to install a working fireplace (that was a task!) and repair windows and masonry and replace beams and roofs. They had kept kudzu from invading the property. And they had spent time and money controlling the vermin and kudzu from the rotting burnt out wreckage of the home that the owners had never demolished. He thought about the phases of this reconstruction as he waited, not exactly thinking he had a right to take the property, but at least wondering. A fat burgundy-colored book plopped down in front of him.

"The Law," Miss Pritchard said.

"Thanks"

"Don't mention it. There's a bookmark," Miss Pritchard said.

"Thanks"

"You are welcome William Daniel."

As he immersed himself in the document in front of him, he measured the enormity of things he didn't understand. And he began to wonder if all of life wasn't really about definitions of words we don't know.

Adverse possession of property was sort of like homesteading from what he could make out. The young man thought about it: the Slades had no interest in and had taken no care of their cabin, which had been a snake- and rat-infested ruin with kudzu holding the walls in place when they arrived. And now it was a convenient

habitation. He was wondering if his Mama might be able to buy the land. The Slades had no right to sell the Bell family what William Daniel and his Daddy had basically built with their hands, but the land. Yes, the land. It was worth 51 dollars at the time, and he could do that. He and his Mama had that much savings. And if the Slades didn't agree, then William Daniel Bell just might try to take it from them.

Mr. Hunt was suddenly sitting down in front of him, white sleeves rolled up, grey vest buttoned tight over his portly belly.

"So, what do you think boy?"

"Well sir, about the letter?"

"Yes, young man."

"Well sir, I think I don't know enough to say anything about it."

"Ok, now there's a start. So, what questions would you need to get answered in order to understand it."

"Well, I'd need to know what the word 'adverse' means for example."

"'Adverse' means against something. Ok, you see 'adverse possession' means that I treat that land exactly as if I owned it, and I make improvements on it even if I don't own it."

"And then you can just take it."

"Well, it's not that clear. But I'm making a fair offer. I've bought it already, at least from one point of view. From the State. For back taxes."

"Well sir, I just don't know."

"Ok. Let's look at it differently. How much is the land your house is sitting on worth?"

"about $50."

"That was a quick answer."

"I was curious about it."

"Ok now, the house you are in now, what percentage of that house was there, as you live in it today when your family moved in."

"What?"

"How much of it have you replaced, repaired, tinkered with or rebuilt."

"Well. All of it I guess. Maybe not the foundations."

"Ok. Are they in good condition?"

"No sir. "

"Do you plan to do something about it?"

"Well, if something can be done, of course I do. I have already replaced the entire porch and its foundations, well, I guess they're not foundations."

"Mmhmm. And what have the owners done on the house?"

"Nothing."

"Did you get their permission to change every board and every window and every slate tile in that house?"

"Pardon me?"

"Did you get their permission?"

"No sir. But I took slate tiles from the roof of the other place."

"Did you do it in secret?"

"No sir.

"Do you pay rent?"

"Well, we did for one year, and then the Slades stopped coming for it. They were all fighting about whether we should pay rent and who should get that money. We haven't seen or heard from them for 3 years."

"Well then, you might be lined up for taking the property."

"I don't intend to take no one's property."

"Anyone's property. That's a good boy, that's fine. How old are you now?"

"Sixteen. Going on"

"Thirty six."

William Daniel just looked at Hunt.

"Dumb joke heh? Well that's fine, young man. That's fine. Whyn'tcha take the rest of the day off. I'll give you your day's wages. Go, get."

"I like working sir."

"You'll work another day."

William Daniel was never so lost as during that conversation. But he felt that kindness from Mr. Hunt.

When he got home, he found his Mama in the kitchen peeling potatoes. That meant it was a good day. He tried to explain to her about the strange law on property ownership. She was as absent as ever, but she obviously understood something of what he said, because her response was to cite her ancestor.

"Yes boy, '*good roads, healthy orchards, meadows, and bridges, where an hundred years ago all was wild, woody and uncultivated'.*"

"We have worked so hard to make this place clean and solid Mama, it would be good if we could actually own it. The Slades act like it didn't exist. They leave us alone so much I wonder if any of them is alive."

She said nothing.

"I wish you had any idea what I was talking about Mother."

"I do! I do!" She looked at him bright-eyed and cheerful and started peeling the carrots and lining them up in a row.

Chapter 33: 1972

The future of the network

Young Dr. Matt Hoshi had read a white paper about the in-groups in Huntsville in the 1960's before he moved down here. He wouldn't have had a snowball's chance in hell to be part of any community in those days. Aside from the fact that a lot of people believed that someone who looked like him still belonged in an internment camp, the rich in Huntsville used to stay with the rich, the poor with the poor, the Germans with the Germans, the crazies with the crazies.

Now here he was, a long-haired, perfectly sane Japanese American in this weird town. What he wanted was to find a place where he would fit in. Not just in the job. His look was fine for the job. But some people to hang out with, even old guys would be fine. Ideally guys from the technical and scientific community that didn't hate talking about serious things.

There was only one guy he could talk to at work, Sam Burns. He was a little older (about thirty), and a mathematician working for IBM. He did not fit into the IBM mold any better than Matt Hoshi fit into the deep south. He was too short, bow-legged, very bright eyed and funny. He rode his bike to work. He was married, but he didn't seem married.

In the big towns like Tuscaloosa and Birmingham today, people didn't give a damn about "groups" any more than they cared about local centers of power like the Fitzsimmons's Brothers and the political jockeying that was done there.

But Huntsville still felt just a little bit like a Rebel enclave to its native sons. Powerful men sometimes dropped in for a shot of bourbon or a cold beer at Fitzsimmons's Brothers Hardware after opening hours, admiring the piles of ancient merchandise that brought the smell of oxidized metals into your nostrils and a taste of rust in your mouth. Mostly the guys, the middle-aged automobile salesman Scotty in the lead, recalled those vivifying discussions of the old days when Alabama did not feel like a vassal to the city on the Potomac. Today, real business was occasionally done there, though on an admittedly smaller scale than before. Pressure was put on the Chamber of Commerce to support local entrepreneurs rather than those Californians who had started immigrating. A delegation was sent to Montgomery to discuss the future of the Monte Sano State park. Whatever had given the State Senate the idea that they controlled the development of Madison County territories?

Anyone affiliated with Fitzsimmons's Hardware and Haberdashery had not spoken to someone like Matt Hoshi ever. He was not going to meet his tribe there.

He thought maybe he'd drop in to that hippy coffeeshop downtown. They a menu as weird as Alice's Restaurant in L.A., but at least they had the New York Times.

Chapter 34: 2011

Carrots and soy sauce and snow peas and cilantro were lined up and ready to go. HPD Sergeant Bertine Kobehi and her Granny, Naphtali Peterson, had done the kitchen preparation, placed all the little Japanese bowls, and set up the burner on the dining room table. The ravioli maker was ready, and the ground chicken, green onions and ginger were waiting cold in the refrigerator. Naphtali was holding onto the counter skimming the chicken soup, and in the background, the television was flashing images of an Italian bicycle race. Bertine kept an eye on the cyclists and Naphtali kept an eye on Bertine.

"This I know how to do Bertine. My Lord how many times I have made good broth in my life? Once a week since I was 10 years old more or less — how many is that? How many is that? Not coming to my mind anymore you know."

"Upwards of four thousand Granny."

"Four thousand. But this is the first time I've made Chinese chicken soup."

"Fondue, Granny."

Amy Winehouse's wild beehive hairdo was on the screen now in a hailstorm of photoflashes.

BREAKING NEWS.

"Upwards of four thousand times I've made chicken soup. I'm finally getting good at it and you go and change the recipe on me."

Bertine grabbed the remote control and turned up the sound.

This is CBS News: July 23, 2011 and a star has passed. You may perhaps think of Amy Winehouse as a Beehive hairdo with too much makeup, but according to many, she was the greatest jazz singer of her generation.

"Why does the TV run all the time in this house? Why not just turn it off when you are not watching it?"

"Sorry Granny. I want to see what's going on with Amy Winehouse."

"You will rot your brain." This was a sentence Granny had repeated so many times in Bertine's life that she didn't hear it anymore.

But like many divas before her, Miss Winehouse's self-destructive habits got the better of her, putting out the fire of a great and distinctive musical talent. She was found dead Saturday in her London home, police said. She was 27.

"Gran, I just want to see if I can find out more about Amy Winehouse."

"She was no Aretha. No Mahalia Jackson."

"But she was great."

"She was mean as a snake that woman. See those eyes? Mean as a snake."

"That's just her makeup. She was a great musician."

"Gotta know what you care about. Who's that?"

"What?"

"Turn around. Someone's at the kitchen door."

"Woah."

It was Detective Eugene Penn. He was looking at his feet.

Chapter 35: 1970

The television was blasting from the den as Nancy Miller poured herself a cup of cold black coffee. Her hands were shaking this morning, and coffee spilled on the floor. She threw a tea towel on the linoleum and wiped up the spill with her foot and kicked the towel back into the corner. The maid would get it when she came in.

Dr. Wernher von Braun, director of the NASA Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Alabama, has been named NASA Deputy Associate Administrator for Planning and is to be transferred to the Agency's Headquarters in Washington D.C.

Today, February 24th all of Huntsville is out on the streets,

"Not all of us." She sounded slow-moving and tired.

giving him the honor he deserves!

"Yeah, well, where's the firing squad then?"

Thousands of local residents as well as state and local dignitaries, lined the streets as von Braun and family were paraded through.

"Yeah, well, turn off the TV."

For years, Nancy Miller had felt like a complete stranger anywhere she lived. In Chicago and Los Angeles in the 1950's, in the Washington suburbs in the 1960's. Always alone. That was fine. She kept to herself, read her books. Spoke to the television.

Her husband wasn't around much, and her kid, even when he was young, was self-sufficient. None of this bothered her. She liked her solitude. It was just her and her paper bag with sweet cheap wine and Triffin or Jung or Kant or James Bond or whoever.

Then in 1968 things got complicated. She messed up some stuff, had a few accidents, including a big one in a Washington suburb that injured a Senator's cousin. Her husband decided to take the job at NASA and move his family to Huntsville Alabama.

She stopped drinking. This time, she knew it was for good. In two basement offices of her house buried in the woods of Huntsville's Northeast residential neighborhood, she covered the walls with graph paper and spent every waking hour tracking the variations in the commodities market. Every evening her husband, a mathematically minded physicist, created formulas to explain the previous day's movement. It was the first time they had talked to each other seriously and at length and without fighting in years. Neither one noticed, neither one analyzed the transition. Instead they put the wild animals that had ravaged their marriage on the scent of a common prey: money.

And they caught it. Over and over and over again. What they hadn't realized when they started the hunt was the size of the animal: They caught it by the toe and then grabbed onto the ankle before they realized it was getting bigger and bigger as they bagged it.

Her husband sometimes said "You're doing good work Nancy." And she said "Thanks."

Nancy Miller had never been so comfortable in her life. She was able to stay home in canvas slacks and men's shirts and do business all day on the telephone, her hair wild and thin and curly, her fingernails dirty, always in contact with EF Hutton but never having to see them. Early in the mornings she made fruit pies, and often during the day, you could see her, a slice of pie in one hand, the Wall Street Journal in the other and the telephone ringing.

On the weekend, she and her husband brought the new bass

boat out onto the lake with their affable dog and their big, funny 12-year-old son. They fished. Nancy hated fish, but she learned to fry it and she learned to make hushpuppies. The shoes on her feet were the gospel of peace to give her firm footing. "*Whatever you want, Don, let's do that."*

As time went on, her stock broker and then his manager started calling Nancy Miller for advice about the commodities market. She gave it, relaxed and happy, from a phone in one of the basement offices, surrounded by her husband's piles of graph paper, cigarette-filled ashtrays and half-empty cups of cold coffee. Upstairs the housekeeper was washing the kitchen floor.

One day, EF Hutton offered to train Nancy to become a broker, and she accepted. This entailed another transition she took as natural, as she had to dress for work. Nancy, a lover of very expensive clothes from the time she was small, began to wear lovely wool suits by Chanel and Dior with flowing gold or ivory or red silk satin blouses and a single opera length string of pearls. She had her fingernails done, but continued to eat pie with her hands. Her hair, even ten minutes after it was done, was wild again. She decided to buy a good wig and stop worrying.

And business developed. The big animal she tracked was getting bigger all the time: she watched her own investments while looking for only the richest of clients. The young men working in her office didn't understand her, and she never thought of trying to explain her motives to them. They were on the hunt for BMW's, ski holidays and good times. She, tracker of capital, was deploying everything that was in her — her mind, her experience, her heartbreak — to catch something ever bigger, ever receding, something so great and so powerful that it could give birth to luxuriant growth in her old wood.

Chapter 36: 1928

Amos and Andy were bumbling it up on the radio, but Billy Dan was not paying any attention to it. It was Sunday and the rain had been coming in sheets all morning long. Nothing was leaking quite yet, but after having inspected the eaves, the seventeen year old man of the house was pretty sure it could start any time now.

Lunch had to be put on the table anyway. He puttered around the kitchen, peeled some carrots and potatoes and put some water on to boil. The radio was sputtering, a slight irritation. The sound often kept his mother quiet and calm. Right now, that wasn't the case.

"It is your heart, William Daniel that does it, that maintains the structure and the awnings of our lives." Her nervousness was rising again. William Daniel decided to change the subject.

"Mama, if it stops raining, on the tenth I have an appointment in court. Actually, even if it doesn't stop raining, I have an appointment in court."

"It is your heart, William Daniel that does it, that maintains the structure and the awnings of our lives. Keeps the water out."

The radio sputtered again. That's the way it always was. It worked a while, then it sputtered, and then it came in clear.

"Do you want to know why I am going to court mama?"

"The heart is a big thing, William Daniel, a driving big thing."

"Mm hmm. It's about the house. I'm going to see about the house."

"*'The instant I enter on my own land, the bright idea of property, of exclusive right, of independence exalt my mind.'*"

"Yes Mama, we are going to see about acquiring this land."

Andy was explaining very loudly to Amos about the current American elections, with studio laughers in the background.

"Turn off that radio William Daniel. Are we going to destroy our souls with contempt of Negros? '*Strange order of things! Oh, Nature, where art thou?*'"

She was pretty clearly getting worked up. Whenever she got that way, her language became a litany of quotes from her ancestor and peculiar metaphor. William Daniel spun the dial on the radio and it hissed at him. He looked straight at his mother and spoke to her sternly one word at a time.

"Do you understand what I am saying to you Mama?"

"*It's beautiful the whalebone, the arch, the near white, the transparent edges, and yet the power to delicately, intelligently maintain and contain so much formless stuff.*"

"Did your ancestor write that? I don't remember reading that." She didn't answer. The sound of rain on the roof hung on for a while as William Daniel chopped the vegetables. Finally his mama said, a bit sullen:

"That's not the only thing I read in my life you know."

He looked at her sideways and smiled. "Yeah, I know. Ok, so do you understand what I am saying to you about the property?"

She didn't answer, and now the receiver sputtered into a general buzz and the lightbulb overhead flickered. It was bellowing rain outside.

William Daniel turned off the radio and switched off the light and wiped his hands on his jeans. The slate roof clattered around the edges of the porch. He went to the pile of shims in the back room, chose five and went out to shunt them into their places. One by one, the slate shingles stopped chattering.

He swiped the rain off the top of his head and called up to the attic:

"Georgy go get a brace of quail from the shack. Grab a few greens."

"I'll get wet!"

"You will. Go now please."

"You don't know what I mean about the whalebone William Daniel, do you"? His Mama grabbed his sleeve as he stepped back to the kitchen

"No Mama, I don't."

She was quiet for a moment, collecting her thoughts with sober focus.

"I mean that your anticipation of future situations and your rigor are beautiful things. "

"Thank you, mama."

"You're welcome William Daniel." She pointed a long fingernail towards the stove. "The fire is *going* to blow out under the water. Better fix it."

"Fix it yourself Mama." The strapping twelve-year-old Georgy was back and his hands were full.

"Georgy, what's the approximate volume of water in this pot?" William Daniel took the quail from Georgy's arms.

"Hmm? Enough to dip a quail I guess."

"Come on. What's the formula for the volume of a cylindrical object?"

"Πr^2 times the height."

"Yep. What's the approximate radius of this pot?"

"12 inches I'd guess." He held out his forearm. "three quarters of a cubit."

"No. That's the diameter. The radius is six inches. And the height of the water in the pot?"

"A foot. Ok so?"

Before the younger boy could either start whining or formulating an answer, something rumbled outside. William Daniel popped his head out the front door.

"I can't tell what that was."

They hadn't been into town for a week and it had never stopped blowing rain. The last news they'd had from Huntsville was that the town of Egon no longer existed. So far, they'd had no threat of flood from the Flynt river and no serious leaks. But the idea of 'serious leaks' during such a long storm was questionable because over time, a tiny flood could burst into a full-scale catastrophe. William Daniel knew their situation was dangerous.

"George, come with me. We need to take care of something."

Georgy joined William Daniel who stood on the porch considering the situation.

"Not sure how we are going to keep that HHI truck from swimming away" observed the younger boy.

"Yep. Keep it from swimming away into this cabin and knocking it down. That's what I'm thinking. Got an idea. Put on your boots, we're going to get it on higher ground and turn it a bit."

"What higher ground? There is no higher ground."

"We're going to make higher ground. Assuming it'll start. Take two shovels from the shed and a saw. Mama do you think you feel up to keeping an eye on the soup pot? We're going to be out here for a while." She did not answer. "Just turn it off. We'll eat later."

"Where you goin' boys? "

"Just outside." What the hell could he say to her.

Mama stood on the porch, taking the whipping rain as if it was the most normal thing in the world. She was watching her boys. It was ok when she watched her two boys working together. The world was ok.

William Daniel had apparently decided to take some large pieces of wreckage of the old Slade place and build a ramp that would allow him to park his truck on the top of the old heap. He carefully drove the truck up and down the cracking ramp and kept getting out, looking at the heap and the underside of the truck. By the third or fourth time everything that was under it had shifted, cracked and sedimented into a stable pile of refuse. And the boys were soaked to the skin. When they had finished, the three of them stood on the porch in the beating rain to survey their work. A wash of something came from under the porch, and William Daniel watched the snakes swimming in the swill. It left him with a certain detached and relaxed satisfaction.

"One less thing to do."

"Just hope the wild things don't find some way to climb into the cab!" laughed George. "Oh no. I've got to go upstairs and check on the goats. They are surely crapping all over the place."

"You took out the rug, right?" Asked William Daniel. "Well, let's just hope it stops raining before the kudzu invades that truck Mama. Come on, soup back on!"

Maryse said nothing, but watched the patterns and beauties of rain and swimming snakes. She stood transfixed.

Chapter 37: 2011

How long had Eugene stood transfixed at that kitchen door without knocking? Must have been a couple of minutes. His eyes fogged over, watching the old black lady by the stove. But when Kobehi's profile emerged into the light, he came alive.

Stepping back from the screen door as it opened, he looked straight at her.

"I read that damned book."

"Well then." She pulled her sweater up around her shoulders. Maple leaves were blowing around the front yard: there were exactly a dozen of them she noted. "Did you finish it?"

"Why did you think that was a birthday present?"

"Because it's a great book by a great writer?" She said this with a warm smile on her face. He wasn't biting. "And I thought it might change your puh-spective." She drawled the words like a Southern Belle and looked back over her shoulder to her granny, who was apparently talking to the television.

Bertine wanted to look directly at him, but she didn't do it. He didn't even have a jacket on, just that short sleeved checked shirt.

"Are you cold? Do you want to come in?"

"One: All that stuff did not happen. And two: who the hell do you think I am? You really think I'm Klan, don'tcha?"

She didn't answer immediately. She wanted to say, "*No I don't. I wouldn't have bothered with you if I did, Gene."* Instead, she just looked at him and wondered if this was worth the trouble. Finally, she pushed open the back door and said,

"Of course, it did happen. It did Eugene …come on in."

"Bullshit Bertine. I don't want to go in."

His response pissed her off more than she expected. "You know sixty years ago it was against the law for my granddaddy to stand outside? In front of his own house? *On* his own property?" Now she had no trouble looking him in the eye. "Like the Jews in Nazi Germany."

He shook his head and looked at his feet. What did she know about him?

"I was not there sixty years ago."

"Oh wake up Gene. Cut the crap."

The porch was feeling very cold to Bertine. And there was her violence again, and she could not keep it from surfacing this time. Her voice had a real edge in it now.

"Here you are hanging with stupid racists and parroting their lame jokes. You don't even believe what you are saying. Feel guilty about *that.* Stop *that."*

Bertine could hear her grandmother setting the table. Eugene apparently had nothing else to say. He was a disappointment after all.

"You know you don't fit in with those guys. You're like a brainy playground reject trying to please the hicks and doodles who bully you. What do you think? They're going to stop bullying you if you pretend to be one of them?*"*

He stepped closer to her, fists clenched, and she held her ground.

"Pshshsh. I like you Eugene. I cannot believe how much I like you. The reason that story bothers you is that you can feel it's *true.* You're the one who likes the true story. Well, here it is, here is the true story."

*

Eugene and Bertine were apparently talking about something important on the back porch. Naphtali imagined it was work, because she had heard they worked together. Bertine was sounding pretty strident, but it was none of her business.

So, throughout all this she settled into her routine of cooking and talking to the television. When two people were in the house, the television seemed an insult, but when you were alone… It was a sort of company to her since her husband had died. She peeled some more carrots and prepared some onion dip. Not very Chinese, but good. She puttered around cleaning up, and she talked.

"Is that Barbara Walters? Well I *am* surprised. I thought she was dead. She has been a good woman. But who the heck is that guy?"

A tall man, the pacer.

The pacer. And you never heard his voice.

"The pacer? Mr. Peterson was a pacer. Mr. Bell sometimes too."

Never heard his voice during the operations.

And you never saw his face.

Never saw his face.

"Who?"

That's remarkable.

It was remarkable. But we had enough, enough…

Circumstantial evidence.

Circumstantial evidence yes. We were saying, well, in the old days we'd not have

been satisfied here. We wanted some proof of something. A sophisticated surveillance system was then set up. We tried to get more, some sound, some better pictures, something. At one point, Leon Panetta just said it to the POTUS, 'We want more information. We can wait, and I just don't think we're going to get more information. We need to accept the uncertainty. And when the special ops teams get there, if they see it's not him, well hell, they can say please excuse us and hopefully walk out. If we bomb the compound, we'll never know if we were right. We need to know if we were right.'

"Oh yeah. Ok. We know who they are talking about, now, right? Yup."

And you were right.

"And you were right."

And we were right.

Something rattled Naphtali in the tones of voice out on the back porch. She opened the door to see Eugene step too close to Bertine and say with clenched fists

"You like me."

"Yes, I like you."

Naphtali took that in, and spoke up immediately.

"What are y'all talkin' about back here? Come on in the house, it's cold out here and there's a Barbara Walters interview you got to see."

Eugene backed away from the door and nearly fell off the porch.

"Watch yourself young man. Watch what you're doin'."

"Ah, sorry, gotta go."

"Y'all can come in, have some soup with us." Bertine was not making a peep through all of this.

"Sorry. Another time Mrs. Kobehi."

"Peterson."

"Another time Mrs. Peterson."

The two women stepped in and the door slapped closed behind them. Naphtali noticed that Bertine was physically shaken by the encounter. She pulled her granddaughter's chin up and looked into her eyes.

"So, do we like this boy or don't we?"

"We like him but we don't understand why."

"Hmm. You don't want to be hanging around a boy who is not a gentleman with you Bertine."

"What are you watching?" Bertine did not want to go there.

"An interview with a guy from the CIA about when they caught Bin Laden. The best way to have a romance is to have your Granny pick the right boy for you."

"Right. Not a romance Granny."

"Hm. Well. We'll see what *he* thinks it is. You've got him pretty mixed up."

I'm telling you we knew we were right as soon as we got into the compound.

How do you know that?

Well the special ops had a pretty clear idea of what Elvis looked like.

"Elvis?" The three women were saying the name simultaneously

They called him Elvis you know? Bin Laden sitings had become as common as Elvis sitings in the 1970's, so they called him Elvis.

That's light.

"Elvis. Well I guess that's kind of funny as code names go."

Were you able to supply proof post mortem?

"I always wondered why we never saw his body," Bertine said.

Naphtali switched off the TV. "Never saw Hitler's body either you know? I always wondered about that."

"They could have photographed it." The two women said. Both of them looked worried.

"There must be a reason." Naphtali said.

Chapter 38: 1971

"There has got to be a reason she rakes it in, Bob. Something's fishy. She's fucking nuts. Every time she opens her mouth it sounds like she is mumbling in Chinese." Anthony Fromm was a tall, attractive young man with vacant eyes. He was speaking to a short guy: twenty-five, well-dressed as a stockbroker should be, but there was something intense and worried about him. Anthony flipped over a paper on the desk in front of him. "There's got to be something going on."

"She is not selling sex, that's for sure," the kid said. He immediately regretted saying that.

"Drugs."

"No not drugs," Bob snapped back, a little disappointed. Anthony didn't hear the tone, didn't even look over at him.

Of course, all of Nancy Miller's young colleagues found her strange. Some of them liked her, some of them didn't. She was always winning prizes, always getting privileges, and her wig was never on quite straight.

In an open plan office, she had insisted on having her desk

against the west window, where the light was good. She was the top producer in the Southeast, and she'd brought in the legendary William Daniel Bell, with his bank-safes full of gold ingots, so they said. So EF Hutton gave her what she wanted. They would have given her a private office, but she didn't want that.

On one wall in the open plan space, she had a print of Vermeer's "A woman weighing her gold", on the floor, a Persian rug. She furnished her space with a Federalist secretary, two luxurious armchairs, a mahogany desk, and in the middle of that desk, a crystal ball. One computer, an abominable mess of printouts, newspapers, magazines books and multiple cups of cold coffee in Havilland China completed the scene.

Bob Morrison, that nice kid with a nice kid's drug problem came to speak to her daily, to see what she was going to be betting on. But Fromm, the number 12 producer in the Southeast, had contempt for her.

"She does her own research my ass." He was rifling through her desk talking to Bob and looking for a printout. "Shit. Cold coffee. She just leaves it there all night. Someone should give her a private office so customers don't have to look at this mess. She's a liar. No one does their own research."

Where did she come from? There she was. In an effort to maintain his cool, Anthony confronted her.

"And why would you do your own research Nancy? In New York, they've got fucking physicists doing the analysis."

Nancy didn't look at him.

"Find what you need?"

"They follow the numbers for the entire market and for all the competitors. Do you do that?"

Nancy was arranging her desk so she could sit down and work. She didn't respond.

"They go to meetings with the top finance people and the fucking CEOs and ask the hard questions."

Nancy looked at him over the top of her glasses.

"Are you finished?"

"Come on Nancy, why would your research trump the God damned physicists?"

Like a fourteen-year-old bully on playground, he wouldn't let go.

"The God damned failed physicists. Are you finished?"

"There is deep financial analysis. They've got real live numbers and contacts with the fucking ***players*** Nancy."

"Anthony if I answer you will you let me go to work?"

Bob had been turning around and walking away and then coming back during the conversation. He was afraid of this confrontation, but he finally spoke up.

"Yeah, Anthony, leave her alone. You're being an asshole."

"If you can answer me, alright I'll never say another word about it."

"Alright then. You remember a couple of years ago NASA put a man on the moon?"

"Oh my God she's crazy." Anthony turned his back.

"Stay with me here, see if you can focus on a problem for longer than a tenth of a second."

"Yeah, he does have the concentration of a gnat!" Bob Morrison chuckled.

"So, man on the moon. To do that, huge funding put into the university system to churn out swarms of young physicists so that there will be a marginal percentage capable of working on the space program."

"Where are you going with this?" Anthony was almost whining in pain.

"Focus …. Focus… So, the Government knew that about 0.5%

would be useful to NASA. 15% would go into university teaching, 20% to top R&D posts throughout the nation, 5% to Bell Laboratories and 59.5% would limp through and get jobs outside of their fields because they had impressive degrees and not impressive minds."

"Where do you get these incredible figures Nancy?" Anthony was getting irritated.

"I have good sources," Nancy said flatly. Bob laughed. "Those hacks are the ones who work at HQ. The hacks. At home, over the dinner table at night, in the morning over my cold cups of coffee and sticky buns, I've got a NASA physicist. Who is interested in the market. Ok? That answer your question?"

"Yeah, well no, not really. Your Dr Hubby go to financial analysts meetings too?"

"Anthony do you ever engage your brain? Do you know what a financial analysts meeting looks like?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah my eye. Have you been to one?"

"Have *you* been to one?"

"Yes. You herd a couple of dozen harassed but very bright 26-year-olds with uncertain, peculiar university degrees into a room. You hand each one a pile of 73 pages of figures carefully drafted by the best financiers in the country to appear clear and to be deeply ambiguous. Now the kids have been thinking about this company for a while, so they feel they probably know what to expect. You generously allow the analysts 10 minutes to peruse these slipping piles of figures and find proof for what they already thought was true."

"That's about it," Bob was talking over her.

"before a handful of Stanford investor relations experts fresh from 20 hours preparation with Yale lawyers and Harvard communications specialists saunter into the room, hands in their pockets.

The Ivy League group really does know the facts. But they have secrets to keep and reasons to keep them. Now, I do follow the analysts. Once in a while they come up with something really interesting. But they are kids. What will a financial analyst be able to tell me after such a meeting that I can't learn from reading the SEC filings and the history of the market and diving deep into the numbers and the personalities of the players?"

Anthony walked back to his desk.

"Nancy, you're better than a line of cocaine some days." Bob slapped a pile of printouts on her desk and headed off.

"Bob. First, watch your God damned mouth. You'll be fired. And second, pretty soon it's going to be time to do something about your bad habits."

Chapter 39: 1928

Someone had lent young William Daniel Bell a shirt that was just a little too big around the collar, and a jacket and a bow tie. They had apparently told him to grease back his hair as well, and to shave the random stubble on his very young face. And there he was, skinny and clean and looking intently at the judge.

"Is anyone representing this boy?"

"No sir, I am speaking for myself."

"I can vouch for him. He bears a listening to, your honor. He is a very serious person"

"And who are you?"

"Mr. Herbert Hunt."

"Of the hearing aid factory?"

"Yes your honor."

Judge Berry looked into Hunt's eyes for confirmation that he was serious about this boy. Berry shook his head and looked down at the pile of documents on his desk.

"So then, adverse possession of a plot of land in the woods of

Madison County. Didn't you have a recent adverse possession suit Mr. Hunt?" Hunt nodded. "Has a surveyor delivered a report on this land Bailiff?"

"Yes, your honor, in the file in front of you."

"Mm hmm. So, what have you got to say for yourself son?"

"For ten years, my family had what the law books call 'permissive use' of this land."

"My goodness, very serious vocabulary indeed. How old are you?"

"Seventeen and a half sir."

"and a half"

"Yes sir."

"Your honor."

"Excuse me sir?"

"You call me 'your honor'"

"Ok your honor."

A titter ran through the courtroom.

"Continue"

"So, we had permissive use of the property. In 1917 Mr. Grant Slade, he died in 1919 of the great black flu, gave us permission to live in a shanty on his property at the request of one of his sisters. We expected to be there only a short time, as my father was away to war in France."

"Did Mr. Grant Slade give you some sort of written permission young man?"

"No he did not, sir, your" William Daniel shifted on his feet, uncomfortable. "Sir. No he did not"

"Your honor" whispered Miss Spencer.

"Your honor. No."

"Well then we do not know that you had permission to live there, do we?"

"Exactly Sir. Your Honor. And, if I can continue, that serves my argument."

"What is your argument then?"

"It is just that we have now lived there for ten years, and then four years ago Mr. Slade's daughter Gillian asked us to pay rent, which we only did for one year and then stopped because no one asked for it anymore. We never saw the Slade family again until they arrived in court today."

"Is that true Mr. Slade?"

"Yes, well but..."

"Yes is yes Mr. Slade, thank you. Well then you do not have permissive use now."

"That is correct sir, Your honor. Partly."

"How so?"

"Well, we paid all of Mr. Grant's back taxes when we moved in, and we paid his taxes every year since."

"Do you have a record of that?"

"I do have this paper sir. Your honor. These papers."

"Bring it to the bench bailiff."

"This is a tax deed Son. Do you know what that is?"

"I do now: I didn't know until I started investigating the possibility of buying instead of renting."

"You do understand that this does not exactly make you the owner of the land."

"Yes your honor"

"Continue."

"So, we have hostile possession of this land, in one sense. And

we own this land in another sense."

"And house."

"Well, the house we more or less built from ruins."

"And now you expect to acquire the land it is built on."

"We have paid off the tax lien. We have enclosed the property, cultivated the land installed electrics and made improvements on the sewage system."

"And why do you say you built the house? I thought Mr. Grant Slade gave you permission to live in the house."

"It was a ruined shanty. I have replaced every floorboard, window pane, shingle and pipe in this place. Gary Slade here present did not help. And, when he was alive, Grant Slade did not help although he was a kind man. He did not pay for the goods it took to rebuild. Is it still his house?"

"The livestock is his."

"Is it? None of the chickens in the yard are the ones he left. He did nothing to provide food for that generation, we saved them from wild animals and starvation. He left 3 and we have raised 16. His cat and his goat were dying when we…"

"You have enclosed the property and cultivated it."

"I have felled trees, hunted bees and installed hives to keep the kitchen garden living."

The judge just looked at him: William Daniel felt he needed to continue.

"I have built walls to protect the property from kudzu and put in paving stones and renovated the well. I dug the shack out of the mud into which it had been encased by flood and replaced rotting wood with salubrious lumber. We have paid his property taxes this 10 years, we have dealt with the wreckage of his father's home, we have protected the land from flood and ill weather."

"And you expect to just take it like that, because you heard of

some old law, son."

"We will be happy to pay the going price for the land itself, which is 51 dollars, but for the rest. Well. With all respect, in what sense is this house his house or this livestock his livestock?"

PART 2
What wasn't supposed to happen

Chapter 40: 2001

"Be with you in a minute Mr. Peabody!" Madison sang out.

"This is not 'be with you in a minute Mr. Peabody' stuff. Y'all come on in here."

Madison popped in the room with two mugs of steaming tea and a slightly confused grin on her face.

"I don't care about Howard Hughes Gran, even if he was a billionaire and married Tallulah Bankhead."

Lulu Bell was glued to the television. She didn't look up to answer her granddaughter.

"Lots of debris coming down."

"Can you tell us more about what you heard when you heard…"

"He didn't marry Tallulah Bankhead. Come. Sit down. This is not about Howard Hughes. I changed the channel."

"Oh my God! There. Oh shit! There!" The woman on the phone gasped. "Another plane. That was another one. It has just hit the other tower. I saw it circle around in front of me. It was a huge plane."

"The World Trade Center?" Madison narrowed her eyes looking at the television.

"Yes it is. Was. Is." Lulu took a mug from Madison and wrapped her hands around it, not taking her eye of the screen.

"Many planes do go into holding patterns for La Guardia Airport in this area. I wonder if there is an air traffic control prob..:"

Pamela was new on Good Morning Huntsville. She felt she needed to present plausible explanations. Tom cut her off.

"Can you tell us how big it was?"

"The plane? It was an airliner. I don't know. How big do they get? A 747?"

"We've got some other tape coming in here, and Joyce from Anniston is staying on the line. Let's go to that video."

"I don't know if I could look again." Joyce was panicked.

"I don't think it could be a 747," the reasonable Pamela said. "Maybe a 727?"

"I don't know. A very big plane." Joyce answered.

"What floor are you on at your hotel?"

Tom was bumbling a bit himself, apparently waiting for the tape.

"I'm on the 36th floor. I have to go. I think I have to go. I think I need to get out of here. I gotta call some people. I don't know what's happening, but …um."

"Be safe then, go ahead," Tom said. "Thank you for your, um, witness, Joyce from Anniston."

He looked at his notes for a full 3 seconds. Pamela peered at the camera, impeccably coiffed and vacant. After a beat she said

"We are having a technical hitch here ladies and gentlemen. If you are just tuning in, the breaking news is this: two planes, apparently airliners, have crashed into the World Trade Center

Twin Towers in New York City." Tom was then jarred awake by something coming through his headset. "Do we have that tape? No we don't have that tape quite yet. We have more coverage on this breaking news after this pause."

"I don't think you are going to need to take me to my doctor's appointment, after all, Madison," Lulu said. "I'm gonna bet I'm not the only one to cancel today. Pass me the phone would you?"

It occurred to Lulu that she was 77 years old as of tomorrow, and that she had lived her entire life without understanding what the heck her country was about. And that whatever it was about had just changed. She had seen it change before, of course. But this time, she was going to guess it had just changed for the worse, and her young Madison and unborn great-grand children were going to bear the brunt of it. They would have to be strong.

"Lucky thing you've got a warrior's soul, Madison. You are going to need it," she said taking her earring off.

"What does that mean?"

"It means I'm an old person in a state of shock making pro-nouncements…" She turned her attention to the phone.

By lunchtime, other planes had crashed in other places and the entire country was in lockdown. Madison and Lulu had sat stunned asking questions to the television. Why would someone want to do that? Why didn't we know that someone would want to do this stuff? What were the causes of all this? If we could understand what the causes were, then we could make some sense of it. Maybe do something about it.

"Is this finished yet?" Madison sounded like a little girl. A plane had crashed in Pennsylvania killing everyone on board. "What does this mean?"

"Well, punkin, I don't know if this part of it is finished yet. And you and me will probably never know what it means. But what I do know is this: it will be a hundred years or more before this whatever-it-is is finished."

"Like the Civil War."

"Yeah like that. Like that like that."

Maybe half an hour passed as they watched what was happening, numb. Then Madison spoke.

"I had a professor in architecture school who said that a home is an event horizon; when you build a new home you create a new reality."

"What does that have to do with the price of bread, young lady?"

"Well, something. I can't put my finger on it. Something like this: You build a home in which people will live, rooms where they will build relationships, rooms where they will do some thinking, rooms where they will take care of themselves and their family, rooms where they will build things. The world was one way before this space is built and another way afterwards. Out of that space that you have designed come new lives, new desires, new realities that are just a little bit different. People take all that out into public spaces. So yeah, kind of pretentious, but true."

"Hmm. Is that deeeep or ooobvious, Madison?"

"It's really not either one, Gran. You create a space, and a new world emerges, even from a trivial space: a new laundry room, a new closet. You destroy a space, a trivial one: change. You destroy a space that was very symbolic, and where many important decisions were made and a totally different world emerges. The change is huge. Something like that."

Lulu understood what Madison was saying now, but she did not know why she was called to think about such an idea at a moment like this one.

She looked at the images on the television again, people running, pursued by billowing clouds of dust, probably asbestos, shards of glass from the richest place in the world, from the beating heart of money, raining down on their heads, people flying out of windows behind them. And she could imagine the faces of the entire nation, with her, transfixed in front of screens, television screens, comput-

er screens. Watching it all, turning the sound up, turning the sound down, the talking heads, the screaming sirens, screaming men and women, the explosions, watching and wondering where their loved ones are. You're in the other room, making tea, and you step out and the world has changed. No one can want what they wanted before. No one, anywhere, can assume they know how things work.

Lulu felt suddenly short of breath.

The world is gone.

Chapter 41: 1971

Uncertain bedrock

"Another world gone." William Daniel Bell pushed out a strong sigh. He dropped the papers from his hands and stood up, looking at the radio.

Today, August 15, 1971, President Richard Nixon has announced that the U.S. will no longer officially trade dollars for gold. We have entered a new era of human history. This is the first time since the bronze age that human commerce has not been based on a foundation, specifically a foundation forged of a precious metal, and most often, a foundation of gold.

"Well, I guess I can't say this comes as a total surprise." He thought about his halting encounter with Triffin's book all those years earlier. It was happening. The value of everything was becoming relative. Maybe it always had been. But what the hell did that mean? He flipped the radio dial to NPR:

… claimed that allied units were engaged in a gun battle in the Vietnamese jungle when New Zealand infantry ran across six American soldiers torturing Viet Cong.

If the previous channel made his mind explode with questions,

this one silenced all those inner voices. He felt his chest rise and fall as he breathed, and the story flowed on. It was not the first time he had heard this story broadcast, but it was the first time he believed it. And then he, who had never been to war, had a very raw imagining of the scene.

All six Americans were reported dead, and the Vietnamese soldiers were released.

With no transition, the story moved on.

In other news Congressional committees and private interest groups are trying to understand the connection between a 2 million dollar pledge from lobbyists to the Nixon re-election campaign and the President's decision to increase Federal milk price supports.

William Daniel Bell felt an unfamiliar pressure in his chest and flipped the radio again, landing on the Beach Boys.

"Let's go surfing now, everybody's learning how…"

He let the music dance on. So. Back to the gold question: it was where his spirit naturally rested. He knew this was coming. But what was "this"? What, if not the bedrock of gold would the American economy be built on? Surfing on uncertainty?

Naphtali buzzed him to say that his 10 o'clock was here. "Show her in," he said as he switched off the radio.

Bell reached out to shake the hand of Nancy Miller, that woman who was so interesting on the phone. She was wearing a damned wig. He tried not to look at it. She was very well dressed, as you'd expect of a stockbroker and she had bright red fingernails like Lulu. But that wig.

And right now, well, he recognized the voice, but he didn't quite recognize the person, the person who could be so intense and technical that he had to slow her down and ask questions. She was being effusive right now. Using superlatives. Nerves he thought.

He would just wait for her to calm down so they could have a normal conversation.

Bell had remained a woodsman at heart. He had a way of accepting folk's oddities, of looking through them and of working with them. He knew it: like trees in the forest, like carrots in the kitchen garden, like goats and fish, people have their particular character.

He saw that immediately in his new stockbroker. The question was not was she unusual, but could she deliver what she said she could deliver? The slightly skewed wig, the poorly applied eye makeup, yes, he could see that. Yes, that was outside the lines. But he had also heard her rigor and clarity on the telephone. He could see the line of successes in her investments.

And she was a workhorse. This one was a workhorse.

As soon as they started talking company fundamentals, she was spot on, spot on.

Like a strong and twisted old walnut tree with roots that balanced its strange leanings, this woman was producing barrels full.

Chapter 42: 1930

How to live the free life

Granny James was homeless, if you could call it that. It was not that she had no place to live: her home, where her daughter Madge and grandbaby Lulu lived, her house that is, was still in her name. It was the home left her by her husband, dead these 10 years. Granny James was always a bit odd, but after her husband's death, she receded into the far reaches of her own imagination, not talking much, collecting bits of yellow paper.

The kitchen garden and bit-work and help from family kept Madge and Lulu and the old woman going. More or less. When one month, the electricity had been turned off, they realized, hey, they didn't need electricity. The three of them were just fine without it. This was the deep South: no snow. They were fine.And they remained fine for the next two months until Madge could come up with the money to get it turned back on.

Then one day in April 1930, when Granny James was supposed to be babysitting, she decided to gather all her bits of yellow paper under her armpits, and go off to live the free life.

"Lulu, Louella baby, I am going to live free. I'll see y'all pretty

soon." And she left. Six-year-old Lulu thought she was coming right back. She slept until her mother returned.

Granny James didn't come back for a week. When she returned, she marched into her bedroom past her weeping and shouting daughter, put on all her southern belle petticoats and a very old dress, rifled through her drawers for change and a change purse and grabbed as many clothespins and safety pins as she could find and left again.

Madge watched her march her swinging hips down the street with all those petticoats plumping her nether parts to the size of a gigantic pumpkin. She turned to little Lulu and looked at her and said nothing.

"Where is she going?" asked Lulu after a few seconds of mutual staring.

Madge turned and walked into the house and sat at the dining room table, her head in her hands.

"What does anybody do about such a thing?"

In the following months, Granny James started coming home every 10 days or so, and fitting more or less back in to the family rhythm. More or less. She now had little bits of paper and two coin purses and messages to herself pinned to her various petticoats. When she showered, she took hours in the bathroom. And if she was generally silent, she made a very fierce noise about anyone who touched her things, including little Lulu.

Madge had lost her secretarial job in the stock market crash of 1929, and having a small child made it very difficult for her to apply for new positions. Cousin Gillian Slade could be counted on most of the time to take care of the little one alongside her own daughter, Nellie Maude. But she would never do it at the drop of a hat. So the day that Madge heard about an opening for a cashier's position at Huntsville Pharmacy, she held her breath and asked her Mama to take over for a few hours. Granny James had just stepped out of the steaming shower squeaky clean and dressed in her odd get-up.

"I will be right back, mama. Two hours. Please?" Madge was

pinning her hat on and grabbing her things as she spoke.

Granny sprayed ancient perfume into her wet hair and agreed to look after Lulu.

The job had been taken by the time Madge arrived in downtown Huntsville. And when she returned home there was no one in the house. It took her about half an hour to grow concerned.

During this time, the old lady and the little girl had headed out 'for a walk'. People turned their heads to watch as they walked by, and one guy in a truck had even shouted "Brush your hair old woman!" Granny James yelled back: "Brush your own! Oh wait! Y'all ain't got any!" But by this time, he was gone. They walked and walked around the neighborhood and emerged into an area with shops and a lot of cars. Granny James picked up her first petticoat and slipped a dime out of one of her coin purses and pressed it into Lulu's hand.

"Go get us some hushpuppies." She pointed to a diner called "*The Shack*" a hundred feet down the road.

Lulu was frightened by this request.

"Right over there, honeybunch. See the place with the yellow puppy sign? I'll wait for you right here."

And so Lulu did as she was told. Granny waited. The greasy bag of fried cornbread, that was their dinner. Lulu began to be afraid, and asked if they could go home. Granny James said yes of course, and started heading off in a certain direction. The streetlights were coming up and the sun was going down. Granny was lost. She had forgotten the name of the street she lived on.

"Let's sleep here, under the stars," she said finally.

"I'm cold."

"If you're cold you can tuck in under my petticoats. You'll see, sleeping under the stars is inebriating!"

Chapter 43: 1972

Barbecued

Lulu was preparing devilled eggs and trying to think what to make of William Daniel's financial adviser. She didn't know Nancy Miller well, but the few contacts they had left Lulu in high spirits. They had lunched one day at Twickenham Station, and Nancy had dropped egg salad on her gold satin blouse without noticing it. That was a tad strange. When Nancy saw the mess, she just flicked the food onto her plate and asked Lulu why she had stopped singing in bars.

The charcoals heating on the barbecue outside sputtered and popped.

"What time have you got?" William Daniel called from the patio.

"Just about show time!" Lulu rinsed her fingertips and wiped her hands on a tea towel.

"What time is that?"

"12… hang on…21." She took off her apron and smoothed her pink rhinestone studded t-shirt, slipped off her house slippers and stepped into her pink rhinestone studded sandals.

Today, Lulu was curious to see who Nancy Miller would be

married to. She called out to the patio:

"There are some people you just can't imagine married to anyone William Daniel; don't you think?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Nothin'. Nothin'."

Nancy, she decided, was just a little bit crazy. *Where'd you think the word 'wiggy' came from?* she had asked William Daniel the night before. *Not wiggy. Different,* he had said. *She's just different.*

Lulu liked the hell out of Nancy Miller. You could just feel the way the gal pulled up all the energy that was in her to go out and meet people and make everything just peachy, when in fact she was scared as hell and wanted to be alone. Frightened as she seemed – her damned hands shook — she stood her ground no matter what came her way. And she seemed to know an incredible amount about the stock market. Anyway, that's what William Daniel said.

Almost the second that Don and Nancy stepped into the door, Lulu thought that this guy was an even stranger match for Nancy Miller than she had expected.

Nancy immediately introduced William Daniel triumphantly:

"This man has felled trees and hunted bees."

Bell screwed up his face and Lulu laughed.

"You have this way of poetically embarrassing people who don't know each other, Nan." Lulu patted her on the shoulder.

"Hunted bees? That's not embarrassing at all." Don Miller took off his NASA baseball cap. "I heard from my granddad about hunting bees."

Don was not made of the same stuff as his wife, Lulu thought to herself. He was not eccentric at all: she imagined he was the reason Nancy's wig was on straight today.

"Ouff, we have saved face!" William Daniel looked at Lulu and she just smiled her big smile and shook her platinum blond head.

Not the same stuff. He was almost one of these "master of the universe" types. "*Why wouldn't I be happy?"* was written all over his face. But something else flickered in him: what was it?

"How the hell did you learn to hunt bees Mr. Bell?"

"Billy Dan. My Mama taught me when I was very little."

"Your Mama — and where'd your Mama learn to do that? Was she a woods woman?" Don asked.

No in fact there *was* something that made the Millers seem joined at the hip: their tactless, no, unembarrassed curiosity.

"She was not a woods woman on purpose. She learned it from a book written by her ancestor."

"Well that's historic."

"And this man has lived in the belly of the earth to mine copper."

"Oh Nancy, Stop it." Miller was irritated now, and Lulu was laughing and choking on her cigarette smoke.

"And has hunted squirrel in the desert."

There she was doing it again! Lulu liked her too much: Nancy was just going to do what she was going to do, no matter what anyone else thought.

"You only came out of the belly of the earth to kill squirrels?" William Daniel was laughing now too.

"See what happens when you let your wife tell your story?"

The conversation continued on the patio, and it was such a tennis match to watch the three of them, the way they interacted, what they seemed to think of each other, it was so engrossing that Lulu simply forgot she was the hostess: she had put out ice tea and peanuts and deviled eggs, but now she forgot her duty. Drinks ran out. Peanuts were eaten up.

She could tell that William Daniel was a little put off by Don. What was it that got on his nerves? Arrogance? The man's contempt

for his eccentric wife? His assurance that he was normal and Nan was not?

Lulu checked with her gut: did she like this guy or not? Yeah, she liked him. He was gallant with Nancy even if he was embarrassed by her. He helped her off with her coat, let her lead the way. And he was full of energy and curiosity and kind of down to earth. But he got on William Daniel's nerves. That was for sure.

A certain indefinite racism emerged from Don's remarks. And particularly a cowboy's contempt for American Indians and their 'squaws'. *Yikes,* thought Lulu. He apparently expected William Daniel to approve of this.

"I think *squaw* is an Algonquin word, Don. You know what it means?"

Don just shook his head and drank his beer.

"It means vagina, Don. That's what the French and English trappers thought they should call the Native American women. That's what they trapped them for. You couldn't know that. But now you do."

"William Daniel has a bit of Mohawk blood," Lulu said. "And some other."

From that point on, the conversation wandered on in distress like an empty dinghy near the shore. Nancy pushed that subject off shore by asking about Naphtali Peterson, and by explaining clearly to Don who that was. And away went the conversation in another direction. Don apparently couldn't get a handle on it: every time he started the conversation in one direction it didn't work. He seemed not to be used to this. Lulu just couldn't tell what kept William Daniel from engaging.

"Copper mining huh? Copper's interesting stuff." Bell started up the conversation again, but you could feel the way he had to revv himself up to do it. "Beautiful in the raw."

He had apparently decided not to be offended by his new acquaintance.

"You can't really see what it is very well in the mines." Don

was relieved to be on familiar territory. “In fact, if you don’t know what you are looking for you can miss it sometimes. Gold veins are much more beautiful. Dramatic: gold being squeezed out of the earth. Sometimes it seems to drip.”

“*The earth brings man bread while in its entrails it pitches and tumbles as by fire. Sapphires are pushed forth out of its rocks*.” Nancy was quoting something but Lulu didn’t know what.

“*And they are dusted with nuggets of gold*.” William Daniel finished the quotation and Lulu beamed: did her man know everything in the world or what?

“Where’d you learn that Nancy?” Don seemed surprised, almost betrayed, Lulu thought. Or maybe he thought she was making it up. Maybe it was that.

“Oh come on Don! I went to Catholic school. We had to learn stuff in the Bible by heart. That was my rebellion: I only learned the lines I thought were beautiful. That one’s from Job, kind of a no-no to our nuns.”

“The best argument against the existence of God is right there in the Holy Bible, that’s why they didn’t like it,” Don responded, satisfied with himself.

“Well. I would have gone for the Song of Songs,” Lulu said.

“They didn’t let us read that at school, Lulu. Too much sex, it was whispered. So I had to read it at home under the covers. Didn’t understand it for years. In fact, I probably still don’t.”

“Sex? There’s no sex in the Bible Nancy.” Don said.

“Aside from Ruth getting into bed with a man she doesn’t know.” Now he was getting on Lulu’s nerves. Dismissing Nancy like that.

“And Lot’s daughters,” Bell said.

“And King David watching Uriah’s wife take a bath. And the Song of Songs which is Solomon’s” Lulu fairly sang. “Aside from that and a couple of incestuous rapes, a prehistoric masturbator and

a questionable relationship between a king and his prince, you're right, there's no sex in the Bible."

William Daniel noticed his wife was angry and changed the subject one more time.

"Well one of these days copper will be just about as valuable as gold anyway Don. Though we won't be here to see it."

Don raised his eyebrows. Nancy clearly liked this subject; it just relaxed her.

"Oh come on William Daniel. Gold has been the most valuable metal to mankind for four thousand years." She adjusted her wig and looked Bell straight in the eyes.

"Well, I'm going to guess all that will disappear. We'll run out of gold."

"How can we run out of gold?" Lulu asked. "There is more dripping in the earth right?"

William Daniel noticed that smoke was coming from the barbecue.

"In any case the Gold standard is history." William Daniel turned the baby back ribs, one by one.

"It was gonna be." Don said. "Everyone knew it was gonna be history."

"Everyone but me, I guess. I should have known. I read this book by a guy named Triffin about 10 years ago." He sprayed something on the ribs.

"My God, Triffin. That was a pain to wade through." Nancy apparently could remember that pain. "What are you spraying on the ribs?"

"A pain and a shock to a man like me. Apple juice."

And as a sort of an afterthought, Nancy threw another idea onto the table.

"Gold is not moving up as fast as the stock market. By a long shot."

"Wonder why that is." Lulu was distressed by how ironic her remark sounded. But couldn't they all just have a good time? It didn't seem like it was going to happen if she didn't make it happen. "Enough of this abstract squabbling. Beer for everyone!" She stood up.

"Not for me." Nancy tapped her as she passed. "And if there's not enough gold, and it ends up having industrial use, demand will skyrocket."

"It already has industrial uses," Don snapped.

"Beer for everyone and lemonade for Nancy!" She didn't wait for Nancy's reply and she didn't turn around, she just kept walking deep into the cool house. She was beginning to feel impatient for this afternoon to end. She walked by the phonograph and put on Billie, and then changed her mind because Billie was never background noise. A little Lester Young would work. It wouldn't keep you from having a conversation anyway. When she came back out, Billy Dan was responding to something she hadn't heard.

"Scarcity is not the only thing that makes for value."

"Good grief is this barbecue pahty conversation?" Lulu patted Nancy on the back and handed her a glass of lemonade.

"Who needs barbecue party conversation?" Nancy said.

Don chipped in:

"Well no need to worry about the price of Gold in the 21st century anyway."

"I guess not. Specially if I'm dead," Bell said.

"You won't be dead." Nancy was chipper, as usual, but nuts, as usual, Lulu observed.

"Of course I'll be dead in the 21st century."

"Anyway, dead, we won't have to worry about anything at all."

"Not so sure Nancy," Lulu Bell was distributing the drinks. "That's when the accounting gets rigorous."

"Hmm." William Daniel played with her fingers as he took the bottle out of her hand.

"You don't believe that shit do you?" Don had a particularly cold look in his eye.

"Don, what would possess you to speak like that about someone else's beliefs?" Nancy tapped Don on the knee. "We are not believers, Mr. Bell, but we guess it's because we are in the dark about stuff you and Lulu understand." She was doing it again, thought Lulu.

"Well. That was condescending Nancy." Bell looked her in the eye.

"Of course I didn't mean to be condescending. I am an agnostic. I don't understand any of that stuff. Anyway, you're running a great company making lots of money. That's the bottom line."

"Well bless your heart Nancy Miller, you are condescending again!" Lulu winked at Nancy. "Sweetie aren't you capable of having a nice superficial conversation like everyone? Tell you what, I'll teach you. We'll go to lunch again at Twickenham Station and this time I will teach you how to be superficial." Lulu was relaxed, but Billy Dan was taking this discussion very seriously.

"Oh come on. I really am not living for my great company. What the hell would that mean?"

"I don't know how to get out of this. Help!" Nancy was now openly distressed.

"Yeah, let's drop it." Don strained to be cheerful now.

Lulu could see that while Don Miller had a strident tone when taken off guard, on principle he didn't like religious argument because it made for tension. In fact, he did not like discussions on subjects he didn't master. And there she got it. This guy, this NASA scientist or whatever he was, was every bit as insecure as

his wife. Except he was unconscious. That's what was wrong with this afternoon. Three people with every reason to be friends had exactly the same weak spot. They felt they weren't smart enough. How long would it take William Daniel to see this and relax?

Maybe she'd do it. Maybe she'd go in the house get a whistle and come out and blow it hard and say "*Stop! Y'all are missin' the point this afternoon. No one needs to prove they are interestin'. Y'all are just fine as you are."*

Instead, she said:

"What William Daniel en-joys if you want to know the truth, is how well he and his people all work together."

"Yeah I guess so. And then we make some money on top of it. And that's *good*."

"I know you like that part," Don said.

"Well what a nice way to think of things William Daniel Bell," Nancy said. "I like that."

Lulu ignored the condescending note, because she could see how damned hard Nancy was trying to be a nice person in a situation that made her very uncomfortable.

"I never expected him to make all this money, Nan. I mean, he had a comfortable life when I met him. I just didn't expect so much."

"Well you are my muse Louella James Bell."

She put both hands squarely on his shoulders.

"Although, if you're going to make money you may as well spend it. But he feels differently."

"*The artificial Wants of Mankind have become more numerous than the natural."* William Daniel and Donald read out Benjamin Franklin's line together, and they were friends again.

"Yeah that's it. But let me whine a minute here. With a very healthy big company"

"It's a medium sized company my love."

"With gold in the bank vaults, and money in the market, with this, we have a custom built 1940's ranch style house, three bedrooms, thick carpet, a DIY workshop, a nice big kitchen, an Olympic swimming pool…"

"The Olympic swimming pool was for you, my mermaid."

"and one housekeeper twice a week. Well we don't have her, we pay her."

"This is a wonderful place! Very tasteful and modern." Was that a trace of condescension in Nancy's voice again? Nancy herself wasn't sure. "And you are not suffocating under too many trees. Don would have been frankly thrilled to cut down every tree in our back yard, which he says ruin the view. But we're renting."

"Renting?"

"Yeah, when you are a contractor with the government..."

"I thought you worked at NASA."

"Well, I do, in a manner of speaking."

"Well yes you do Don."

"Let's not get into this. When you're a contractor, anyway, you have to be ready to move to where the work is. So we rent."

Lulu could feel how tense the Miller's relationship was. The Millers probably didn't even know how hard they were working to get along. She knew she didn't have this problem in her own marriage. But this afternoon, their bitterness was bleeding into her exchange with William Daniel.

"Anyway. We have enough. But life is not extravagant in Belltown."

"You drive a Cadillac." William Daniel was surprised to have to defend himself.

"I drive a used Cadillac." She pinched him one.

"Two years old. Absolutely fantastic value for the money. Not a dent, pale pink, low mileage. What more does a princess want?"

Lulu Bell laughed at his refusal to want more.

"Nothing honey. And I've got a Ford truck and a 1957 Chevy in the garage as well."

"A 57 Chevy?" Don was surprised.

"Best car ever built." William Daniel said.

Chapter 44: 2011 HPD

Be smart and shut up

Detective Eugene Penn dropped the rolls of flipchart paper on his desk and ran his hand over his balding head. One day soon it would all be gone. Maybe he should just shave his head like the guys on television do.

"Jewish men don't shave their heads Eugene except for a very good reason. Like they are in trouble with God," his mother had said to him recently.

This sort of remark stunned him, because all through his childhood she had said something completely different.

"There is no reason to talk about being a Jew, Eugene. It'll just cause you problems. Be smart and shut up."

It's not that Jewish families were in hiding in Huntsville, but unlike the other descendants of the first Jewish families in Madison County, Eugene's mother did not belong to Temple B'nai Sholom. Marrying beyond the pale of the Jewish religion meant she forfeited her connections to the community and even, in her particular case, to her family. The Wise's had been among the first Jews in the South and took her marriage very bitterly. Eugene's father had

also been separated from his Baptist church years earlier when he decided to become a jazz musician. Eugene's Dad didn't care about not being part of a church. He was "white bread American" and didn't believe any of that church stuff. No one noticed.

Jana Penn did believe, and did feel that being Jewish was important. She struggled with her choice for several years before relaxing about it. When she relaxed about it, it occurred to her that in Huntsville if you weren't just like everyone else you needed the protection of a community. She decided to keep her beliefs to herself. She decided to be just like everyone.

So Eugene had shut up about his jewishness as a child. That playground question, "What are you?" had stumped him over and over. You were supposed to say *I'm Methodist*, or *I'm Baptist*, or occasionally *I'm Jewish* or if your family was rich *I'm Episcopalian*. And then the kids would know what you were and you could go on with whatever. "I'm nothing," He would say, and everyone would burst out laughing. "Yeah, you're nothing and you're fat and you're stupid." They took to asking him the ritual question every time it occurred to them.

He ran his hand over his bald pate again and unrolled the enormous pieces of recycled flip chart on his desk.

"He was a very handsome man, your father," His mother used to say. *"What a beautiful head of hair he had. Even when he got cancer and it became very fine."*

His father had not lost his hair. But then he up and died in 1993 when Eugene was not quite twenty. Eugene stopped school and got a damned job.

The six sheets of flip board chart were a pain in the neck to tape to the wall behind his desk, but he was happy to be doing it. He had always liked the idea of the incident board. The way the board forced you to be logical and forced you to be illogical. Forced you to use your whole brain as his mother used to say. He liked getting the overview and the details of things at the same time. He liked the hunt and he liked the story. He liked watching the logic emerge

from the facts. He liked nosing into things that were none of his business, because that was his business.

He liked this board in particular because it kept him from interacting with anyone. Right now, other guys on the team got on his nerves beyond belief. He had nothing to say to them anymore. And he especially had nothing to say to the Miss Priss Kobehi, who, by the generosity of God, had been partnered with McFee to learn about dealing with online documentation.

Eugene blocked off his papers into sections with titles underlined in red. *Diagrams -- Crime scene -- Suspects -- Timelines -- Law enforcement data bases -- Eyewitness accounts -- People connected to suspects -- Evidence -- Media coverage.*

Across the bottom of the last of the floating recycled pages was written in not very neat handwriting: *"Once upon a time there was someone who buried three postal bags of cash in small denominations in his (or her or someone else's) garden. And that was the very best thing to do, given the way things were."*

This story-telling device was important to him. The money was buried in the fucking ground in the middle of town. Why was it buried in the fucking ground in the middle of town? Because, here, as with every crime, this seemed to be the best way out of a terrible problem.

"It's true, we needed a board for this story," The chief said when he saw it, "But it's a cold case, buddy. Don't let it get you distracted from your real work."

It was indeed a cold case, cold as a witch's tit and no budget for it. A few months ago, everyone was buzzed about the postal bags stuffed with money found in Mr. and Mrs. Bell-Garth's garden. Today things were moving on. The Bloody Bette case had just been closed, and the media was still obsessed with it. Then in the live file, there was one murder, one suspicious death, and one rape.

For this cold case, there was apparently no victim. Just 3 bags of money. He tacked that zipped plastic bag with one 2 dollar bill

to the *Evidence* section. Then the zoomed photos of two hairs, the blond and the black. Then the photos of the postal bags and of the tin-foil wrapped cash. Then a scrap of that industrial quality tin foil.

"Interview the post office about use of postal bags", he was writing on a note pad, "Easy to get hold of one in 1971? Must a 1971 postal bag necessarily have been delivered in 1971? Is anyone working at the Central Post Office in 1971 still alive?"

"Eugene, I told you to ease up on all that stuff. Go see Colleen. She wants some paper from you," Manville called from across the room.

He'd do it in five, he said to himself. Under C*rime Scene*, he tacked a photo of the house in the Twickenham district. You could see a corner of Temple B'nai Sholom just behind it. Back to *Evidence*: An enlarged photo of the red clay and the greyish black dirt dusted onto a silver ingot. The black part looked like potting soil he thought. He slapped a post-it note on the photo: "potting soil?" *Media coverage:* A three-line article about the find from *The Huntsville Times*. Two years ago, it would have been worth a lot more than 3 lines, but today the media had not finished obsessing over Bloody Bette, that murderous lady professor. 300k from 1971 passed under the radar screen. *Persons of interest: Mrs. Bell-Garth and her husband*, although that made absolutely no sense. *The previous homeowner whoever that was*. Slim pickings.

He grabbed the file with the incident reports and headed off to see Colleen. He'd take the opportunity to ask her to get the names of the people who had lived in Ms. Bell-Garth's house in 1971.

Eugene slapped the file on his leg as he walked off. He was kind of glad this was a cold case. No one was going to take up space on the Great Whiteboard for this story, but that meant no distractions for him when he looked at the *Bell-Garth Incident Board*.

"Jewish men don't shave their heads Eugene", he heard his Mom's voice in his head again.

"Oh, come on Mom. I'm not Jewish."

"I'm Jewish, you're Jewish. For what it's worth, that's the way it is."

Be smart and shut up! she had said when he was a kid. But now that he was approaching middle age and now that she was ageing, it had become important to her. Like it had become important to her that he get married.

"Look, you could just go to High Holiday services once a year. You might meet a nice girl. Or maybe a Jewish dating website. Aunt Sarah says these exist. You never know where you might meet a nice girl."

He knew there was a computer program that allowed you to do incident boards on the screen of your computer and integrate information from the internet. But he wasn't sure that this program was *material* enough to make sense. Although it could contain videos and internet access. Anyway, these things cost a fortune. And his case had no more budget.

Chapter 45: 2001

Nancy Miller had been up since four in the morning, buzzing with excitement to be in New York City, and by 4:24 she was out the front door of her hotel and walking towards Wall Street. As she walked under the streetlights through the city-canyons, she noticed people standing in line in front of office buildings as early as five in the morning. She saw signs: the polls were opening at 6 a.m. that day.

In her brand-new beaver-collared Lord and Taylor winter coat, with her silver tipped cane, she strolled on until she reached the Wall Street Bull. It made her so happy. Don would have said this was senseless behavior, that she was an obvious target for muggers. But her cane would be a good weapon with its pointy tip. And she left everything but a ten-dollar bill in her hotel safe.

In her long walk, she passed in front of the Twin Towers, and people were already heading into work. She knew she would be back in this neighborhood a bit later, in a suffocatingly boring Seminar that preceded the awards ceremony. She would take copious notes to stay awake.

She walked and walked and now that the morning was warming around her, she let the coat fly open: it was far too warm for this

thing. She needed to get back to the hotel and take it off. She'd order breakfast in her room, have a bath, do her nails and get ready for her ten o-clock seminars.

Out of the bath at 8:35, her hair in a towel and her wig waiting combed on its stand, Nancy was wrapped in the great luxurious bathrobe of a five-star hotel. The waiter had served her coffee from a pseudo federalist silver-plated carafe. The coffee in its a pure white Wedgewood teacup was waiting for her on the mahogany table. It smelled lovely and bitter. Naturally, it was still hot. "So, naturally," she thought to herself, "I will drop an ice cube into it and watch it melt. Naturally." She liked that word this morning.

At 8:43 the phone rang. "Naturally, that will be Don," she said out loud, "because he is good, and so is life." And it was.

But Don was not calling to say congratulations or have a great day; he was speaking quickly and clearly and giving orders.

"Hi. I have to be fast. Listen carefully: go get a pencil and a paper and come back to the phone."

"What?"

"Just do it honey."

When she was back he said the following things: "I am going to give you a few lists. Write them down on separate pieces of paper, and then copy those lists. Do it now."

"What?"

"Ready?"

"Ok, ready…"

"1. Move your room down to the second or the third floor. 2. Extend your visit in the hotel from four to seven days. Use your Amex to pay in advance. 3. Get a second room for yourself on the second floor. Seven day stay."

"Ok got it. What's up?"

"Just listen and write. 4. Call Matt Hoshi at this number." He

read out a number, she read it back to him, and he continued. "Hoshi will contact Sam Burns. As soon as they can, Sam and Linda will come get you. The second room is for them. 5. They will stay there the night and drive you home. Got that?"

"Got it."'

"That's your first list. Don't dawdle. Make that call immediately or phone lines will be out."

"What the hell is going on?"

"Focus. As soon as you have spoken to Matt Hoshi and read the list to him, make your second copy of the list. Stick one on the inside of your hotel door, put the other in your purse. Now, you are not going to any meetings today, and you are not going home by plane tomorrow. You are going to stay put in that hotel." At this point there was an incredible explosion somewhere in the city. "I'm sorry Nancy. So sorry."

"Oh my God! What was that?"

"Just listen. You are not going home by plane at all."

Nancy pulled back the curtain with a violently shaking hand.

"Smoke is billowing from the Twin Towers."

"I know. It's not finished, I will explain later. Other people are waiting to use this phone. You will be fine where you are. Just keep writing."

"My hands are shaking too much. Why am I calling Matt Hoshi?"

"He will organize things. Take a deep breath. Real deep. Now breathe out. Call Matt Hoshi"

"Ok. Ok."

"Now the second list; I will wait, but focus. You will place it in your purse and then post it on the door of the fridge when you get home. Listen carefully and write.

ON FRIDGE DOOR

- Take your meds
- Eat three meals
  - Eggs in the morning
  - Salad at lunch
  - Meat and soup at night

- Take your blood sugar
- At rising
- At 11
- At 4
- At 10
- Walk every day.

"Listen to any advice you get from Matt Hoshi and Sam. Just do what they say. Don't worry about me, I will need to stay on in Washington."

Chapter 46: 1931

Protocol

William Daniel came slapping into Miss Pritchard's office feeling a little bit shy, as usual, but very happy. He held the large magazine in his hand: *Radio Craft*. She looked at the cover picture and looked up at him over her glasses. He stopped in his tracks.

"Dear boy, would you please go back out that door and knock?"

"Oh. Did I interrupt?"

"No, but the door was closed and people knock on closed doors."

"Ok. I'm sorry."

He knocked.

"Come in!"

As he strode back in the door he was talking, but Miss Pritchard was careful not to listen.

"Master William Daniel Bell, animals who come into each other's presence sniff each other about the mouth and the private parts to get the lay of the land. Human beings do something different."

"Oh. K." Now he was confused.

"We do the same thing with talk. Say "Hello," William Daniel, and ask me how I am."

"Hello." He let the silence reign a second. "How are you Miss Pritchard?"

"Well I'm just fine, William Daniel Bell, *and,* how are you?"

"Well, fine, I guess."

"See, now, that's just peachy. Now you do that every time you come into someone's presence, would you my dear?"

"Ok."

"Those are the human rules, no matter how excited you are about life."

"Ok."

"Ok. So, what's on your mind William Daniel? You want another promotion? We don't have that much cash you know."

"No ma'am. I just wanted to see Mr. Hunt."

"About something that's going to make money for this poor sad company?"

"Yes ma'am. At least I hope so."

"In that case, let me see if he's busy."

When William Daniel walked into his office, Mr. Hunt was playing with his radio trying to get a clear signal.

"This Scottsboro boys case just goes on and on. They say the Reds are getting in on it."

A statement by HG Wells, 33 members of parliament and a long list of other well-known English people has condemned the death penalty given to the eight boys as "inhuman" and "fueled by mindless passions."

"Wells. Who is Wells?" Mr. Hunt switched the radio off.

"No sir! Don't turn it off. I mean, hello Mr. Hunt, how are you?"

Mr. Hunt looked at him surprised and amused.

"Fiiiine... and you, young Mr. Bell?"

"Just fine, thank you for asking."

Mr. Hunt was even more amused.

"Well that's just peachy."

"That's what Miss Pritchard said."

"Get to the point young man." This was actually irritating.

"H.G. Wells might be the writer, Mr. Hunt."

"Ok, ok. Why are y'all coming to see me?"

"Well, to get down to it, I read in *The New York Times*…"

"Oh yeah I always forget you read *The New York Times*." Hunt was stacking papers on his desk not giving young Mr. Bell his full attention.

"When I can sir. And it's not very often. I read that unemployment is 25% in Alabama by latest count. Four Banks have been closed and a lot more might be closed soon. And the demographics are changing."

"The demographics."

"The age and profile of the population sir."

"I know what demographics is boy."

"Well they want to live differently. And they are younger and want modern life. Rich old customers in the Southeast buying hearing aids…"

"Yeah I know … alack and alas."

"So, radios."

"Radios."

"Let's build radios."

"What?"

"Better ones than that." He pointed to the sputtering Redding Radio on the table. "It's pretty close to what we are doing. Amplifiers and things."

"What?"

"I built one at home sir. It gets better reception than you do. I'll build another one for you right out in the packing department so that you can see we will be able to do it with what we have in the plant. We'll need a furniture supplier. A wood worker of some sort. But otherwise we are fine. We could even sell build-it-yourself kits for kids."

"Kids don't want to build radios."

"I did. It was fun."

"You are a strange kid."

Chapter 47: 1971

Linda Petteway laced up her bodice, pulled on her soft calfskin boots with the long fringe and put a little patchouli in the crooks of her arms. She told her father he didn't own her, she kissed her mother and she was ready to go. Her stuff had been packed into the back of her Chevy Nova convertible, neatly tucked in and around her grandmother's Singer Sewing Machine. Since the morning was beautiful, she had battened down the top.

She'd thought she would stop and pull it back up as soon as rain threatened. But why not just enjoy the colors and the vibes on a day like today? It was the first day of the rest of her life for herself and the baby in her belly. An entire new reality was going to open up before her, and Trent was going to be really surprised! He'd be a great father. Driving through New Jersey she sang with Aretha on the radio even after the reception became scratchy,

"Forever, forever," she danced in her seat as she drove.

They didn't have to get married right away, she'd tell him. They could take their time.

"I *will* love *you*, da da da da." You didn't need the exact words of this silly song. There were better words to be recalled. Love

could take its time because that's the way true love is. *Love is not love that alters when it alteration finds, nor bends with the remover to remove.* Shakespeare knew love. Aretha knew love. Or was that the Supremes?

The Stonewall Jackson Hotel in Staunton Virginia used to be a nice place. It smelled kind of musty she noticed, but the lobby was beautiful. Or the architecture was anyway. Someone needed to renovate this place. Anyway, after 600 miles on the road, it would be ok. She'd be able to order a hamburger from room-service, watch the news and sleep.

The next morning as she was carrying her bag back out to her car, she saw purple and pink covered tables in the conference room, and a curly headed woman playing solitaire while someone in front of her watched intently. She walked in to observe. On the table were the biggest, most beautiful cards.

"Solitude. You don't like solitude, but you need it. It's a light to you. All these complicated problems you are managing, you don't understand them, but you work your way through them very well. You have always functioned like that. Nothing is a game to you. You don't learn from play. Play frightens you." She stopped speaking for a minute and fiddled with the corner of a card. "You will soon meet someone who teaches you how to play. You will think you are in love with him, but that won't be his role in your life." She was silent again. "He will go up in smoke." Silence. "It will be very painful to you, but a very lucky thing as well. If he stayed you would destroy each other." She was quiet again. "That's all I've got. That's all I have for you." The complicated solitary woman signed her check and pushed it across the table.

Linda Petteway was frozen in her tracks.

As the card reader was slipping the check into her wallet she asked Linda

"Do you want a reading?"

"A reading? Are you reading people's futures?"

"Future, past, present. All the same stuff. That's what I do. 15 dollars."

"That's a lot of money."

"Ok. Very good then."

"Um but I think I want a reading."

As Linda drove away that morning, she felt pretty confused. The happiness of the previous day faded in and out, and twice she found herself sobbing.

"It was just a childish game with cards. Did you see her hair? She was a huckster; I can't believe I paid her 15 dollars. Don't worry my little baby; your Daddy will love you." She turned the radio up on the music to Shenandoah, the song her dad always whistled. The lyics were strange though. She ignored them and sang the words her daddy had taught her

O, Shenandoah, I love your daughter,

away you rolling river.

I'll take her 'cross yon rolling water

Ah-ha, I'm bound away, 'Cross the wide Missouri.

Chapter 48: 2001

8 a.m. New York Time, 7 a.m. in Huntsville

Bertine Kobehi woke up early that morning. By the time she was out of the shower, she had decided that even if she didn't like the damned job, she would go in early today: She'd arrive with the security guard at about 8:00, well before the white female drones started arriving at 9 a.m.. She'd arrive before the place smelled of bad perfume and hairspray. Before the ongoing circus of open space office competition for bullshit limit racist jokes and stupid nasty criticisms, talk about clothes and fingernail polish and questions about her corn rows as well vague attempts at proving who was the queen bee. She'd arrive before all this got the better of her again. She spent way too much of her time saying "All y'all keep it down" and "I'm trying to think here"!

She'd be able to finish the price lists. Get that off her desk, and start calculating overheads for the second quarter. And leave early. Go the movies. Or go see Granny.

At five minutes to eight, she grabbed her thermos, her car keys and her purse, slipped off her house shoes, stepped into her work shoes and headed out.

As she was locking the door, Bertine Kobehi could hear that the old guy in the apartment next door was listening to Good Morning America way too loud again. You could smell the coffee-maker-boiled coffee coming from under his door. He must have been up all night.

Someone was screaming "Oh my God! There. Oh shit! There!!" Maybe it wasn't a morning show. Maybe it was a bad movie. Miss Ainsly downstairs was probably going to come running up here any second to pound on that door and yell at him. Bertine quickened her step.

1 p.m. New York Time, 1 a.m. Zhengzhou

It was one in the morning in Zhengzhou China, where a twenty-five-year-old English teacher had been up far too late studying Chinese. Jake Pierce felt pretty foggy in his grimy balcony kitchen waiting for the water to boil and staring out the window into the night. No one here used electricity at night. He could have been staring into a dark woods or into an unlit swimming pool rather than into this forest of 1960's "people's apartments". Had his place been on the other side of the building, he would have seen the distant cranes faintly lit, and the outlines of modern buildings going up downtown, beyond the many alley-way villages that had been there for a century in their primary colors and blackening rot. This was a huge city he had never heard of until he went travelling and took up teaching English in third world capitals. Now he was here; and although there was a lot of what an American would call poverty, he had a hard time thinking of China as a developing country.

Jake was deciding whether he would simply stay up all night or try to get a few hours shut-eye before walking the quarter of a mile to the agricultural college next door, to teach thirty bright and smiling faces to repeat inane sentences about kudzu after him. This was the drill. The Chinese liked drills, and felt lost when asked to develop their thought with their limited vocabulary. So he made them talk about kudzu just to keep things a little interesting and

funny. Kudzu, he taught them, was something you could eat, but also something that could eat your car, your house, and your trees. He had photos to prove it. Kudzu lent itself nicely to many colors, verbs and tenses. And it was an exotic and dangerous Japanese plant, which seemed to make the souls of the Chinese Ag school students tremble with curiosity. Hopefully they would never get near enough to the poisonous vine to find out you couldn't really eat it. Maybe it was time to prepare a class on believing everything people tell you. They would laugh, he was sure.

This job had changed him. It made him laugh more than he used to. It made him like all kinds of people. It made him disciplined on a day-to-day basis, because walking into a room full of young students unprepared was a withering experience, and it gave him some time to write the book about his adventures, perched in a trendy second floor "coffee shop" whose bay windows overlooked the city center. He watched the colorful tops of tuk-tuks glide by slowly, going the wrong way on one way streets, threading their way through crowds. Sometimes seven people were stuffed in the little cabs, sometimes the roofs were covered with produce carried from the distant markets to local restaurants. He used think this spectacle was pretty and funny. But living here, he realized it was hard fucking work for those tuk-tuk drivers not to get everyone killed, and especially, not to drop the merchandise.

This wasn't the only shift in his thinking since he started the life-trek that started Huntsville Alabama, travelled through Paris France and brought him to Zhengzhou China. He was now questioning the unconscious superiority he had felt as an American citizen in his first months abroad. And people everywhere, in Paris of course, in Turkey, and Nepal, but also Algeria, and Germany, and now China, were opening up about their suspicions regarding the United States' motives for … well, for everything.

Anyway, he was getting too old for this job and for the road. Time to go home and pull together his notes about these last three years and write that book. Maybe he could write a travel column for his dad's newspaper. He would see.

His phone rang. He grabbed it quickly, because phones ringing in the middle of the night were a problem in these buildings. The walls were made of rice paper, another teacher had muttered one day.

It was his Dad, who apologized for calling so early, or late or whatever it was, but said it was almost impossible to get an international line right now. He announced that someone, well not the same person, had flown two planes into the World Trade Center, and his boy maybe he should come home on the first flight out.

"Wow. Whoof," Jake realized he was making weird noises. "But shit. Ah fuck. I am not surprised."

"What the hell are you talking about? And watch your language." His dad was angry.

"You need to travel more, Dad," the kid whispered urgently.

On the other end of the phone, Jake's dad raised one eyebrow. Kids were so sure of their superiority these days. Had they fought the Japanese during the great war?

Jake, well, Jake had to think, he said. Maybe he should wait before coming home. He said to his Dad he had this feeling there was more to come. It would be coming from everywhere now.

His Dad just said, yeah, I know. Get your butt home.

5 p.m. New York Time, 4 p.m. Huntsville

Towards the end of the day, Madison and Lulu were still sitting in front of that television set, watching reruns of people running in the dust and the debris. The two women, the young one and the old one, barely even knew why they were watching it anymore. The phone rang, Madison handed it to Lulu without taking her eyes off the screen. It was about someone they knew: a friend of William Daniel's and Lulu's had been in the Pentagon when the plane struck it.

"Oh, Gran, I am so sorry. Oh poor Nancy."

It was Nancy Miller's husband. He was one of those guys that worked for the big defense contractors that Papa Billy Dan used to complain about. Don was ok. Kind of easy going and cold and smart and secretive all at the same time. Madison could never get a very clear picture of who he was though, and she worked on it whenever she saw him. As a puzzle. Now he was gone and she would not be figuring him out.

Then somewhat later, there was a knock on the front door: it was Maddie's boyfriend Glen. He came in and sort of circled the entry way like a tired dog chasing its tail. He was muttering something about someone they went to high school with, someone Glen was close to. The guy had probably died in the World Trade Center too. This wasn't a great friend of hers, but she knew him. He was the only Muslim at Grissom High, and he said to her he decided to leave Huntsville for Georgetown University not to get a prestigious degree in public policy, but to get away from kudzu and the White Supremacists. Madison told him he was crazy. There weren't any more White Supremacists in Huntsville, except maybe that guy who worked at the 7/11 on Memorial Parkway.

Idriss'd been working less than a week for a top consulting firm in the North Tower when the plane hit his floor.

Something weird was going on with Glen. He seemed to be furious that his friend Idriss had hung on to his family's traditions and religion.

"Look where it got him. Asshole. Fucking camel jockey asshole."

Lulu looked up at him over her reading glasses. Madison's jaw dropped.

Chapter 49: 2011

The pension

"That Whoopi woman. She just looks atcha and ya wanna laugh."

Nellie Maude Slade took an old lady's step towards the television set, transfixed by what she was watching. She almost tripped over her dog.

"It's always the animals't sees the ghosts, ain't it Boxer Junior?" The television sang out at her.

Oh, my love my darling, I've hungered for your touch a long lonely time,

She and Boxer Junior started howling together to the song:

time goes by so slowly, and time can do so much! Are you still mine? I need your love I need your love God speed your love toooooo meeeeeee!

"Foo. Got to get to work. Away you go."

She snapped off the TV and readjusted the embroidered unicorn pillows that Lulu had given her for some birthday or another. The

dog jumped on the sofa.

"Get off 'a there, Junior!" the old lady said without enough conviction to make the animal move.

In the kitchen she slapped a cat off the counter, pulled the pots out of the sink one at a time, swiped the slop that remained into the trash can and made what she thought was a neat pile of dishes to the left of the sink.

"Eeahh! What's that?"

The orange Fiesta Ware coffee cup sported a green and white and black beard peaking up over the edge. She placed it on the counter and rinsed her hands in hot water. She held the bearded coffee cup far out in front of her, opened the creaking screen door, and dumped the contents on the bare ground next to the doorstep near the patio and backed quickly through the screen door with a disgusted look on her face. Grant Slade's sepia photograph glared at her.

"Sorry about that Grand-daddy. I did let things go a little far this time."

She kissed her fingertips and planted that kiss on the forehead of the photo, the last one taken of him before he died of the black flu.

"But I have been so tired you know? I am old old old my darlin', older'n you ever saw."

Pulling open the window above the counter, she snorted "Well, ready to go then," and ran a sponge across the peeling paint of the woodwork for no particular reason and to no particular effect. She repeated herself, "Ready to go, then" and blasted water around the kitchen sink. "Shit!" Nellie Maude revised her estimation of the situation.

"Well, not quite not quite not quite."

The water was backing up. She hitched up her sleeves and fetched a penny off the windowsill, and plunged her forearm into

the rising swill and gave that penny a jerk somewhere down in the mess. "Mistake." She had forgotten to put her bucket under the plumbing, and now it had all released into the cupboard and onto the floor around her feet. Three cats scattered out of the kitchen.

"Now I don't have to worry about sweeping before I wash that damned floor." She was chuckling to herself. "Come on, be serious, finish before cousin Lulu gets here. Ain't my birthday. She can't be bringing me a present. Who knows. Lulu announces herself, we get ready."

The dishes washed, the kitchen aired out, the floor mopped up, Nellie Maude was tired again. She plopped down on the couch. Cigarette break. As she puffed on her Marlborough with one hand and petted Boxer Junior with the other, she thought that while the general dustiness the place might not satisfy Her Highness, hell, some good work had been done.

Lulu was Nellie Maude's old age pension. "It never stops, just have to keep on working. You'd think I was hired to be a housekeeper." She smashed out her cigarette, and rolled her heavy forms to rise from the sofa. "Better do a fast dust of Lulu's flat screen TV. It's too obvious." She stacked up some TV Guides for good measure. Toddling around the room, she swiped a variety of sweaters, kitchen towels and underthings off the furniture "That's the trouble with cleaning Junior, the more you clean, the more everything looks like a mess." She dumped everything into the hamper in the laundry room and walked back into the bedroom to change. She would not be hanging up clothes and she would not be changing the sheets.

"Enough is enough."

She grabbed an orange cotton dress off the rack without looking at it, slipped on some relatively clean house shoes, put on an avocado colored sweater and went back in the kitchen to feed the cats. "God damned varmints, gotta snoop around where you are not supposed to be." They were all on counter, nosing around the Villeroy and Boche canisters again. Nellie Maude pushed them aside and

turned the top on the middle one so that Lulu would not see that the little lemon had been broken. The kitties sidled forwards on the counter, one after the other, rubbing their necks up against the microwave, sniffing at the door. "No there is nothing in there for you to eat. I don't like snooping kitties," she snapped and smacked them off the counter one after the other.

Nellie Maude noticed a problem and adjusted the tin foil on the broken kitchen window pane. "This tape never sticks," she grumbled. And she heard a voice come from behind her:

"I'll get someone in here to fix it."

Nellie Maude did not say hello but spoke to her cats.

"Oh no, sweet things, get off that counter again. I'll feed yah, come on, we've laid a nice newspaper down here, let's go get your Friskies. So, Lulu Bell, what are we up to, walking into people's houses without knocking?"

"Sorry dear. I knocked and knocked. The water was blasting and sloshing. I heard you moving around. So I knocked again. Then I sat on the porch swing and waited and waited. Didn't you hear it creak? I came in when I heard your voice. You goin' deaf?"

"No."

The cats were fed. The coffee was ready. Nellie carefully placed her just-washed cup on the floor, sank into her sagging blue sofa and noticed the dust rise from where she placed her hand.

"Well, y'all'll never guess what happened to Maddie." Lulu seemed cheerful and Nellie looked up and said nothing.

"Well aren't y'all curious?"

"I don't know. Is she ok?"

"Yeah."

"Well there you go."

"She found something buried in her garden."

"No." Nellie Maude said it very flatly.

"Yes, she did."

Chapter 50: 1971

So bright was the day, the sunlight streaming through the five tall windows of the apartment, so bright was the day that both women had to shade their eyes.

"Those damned windows are dirty. I forgot those damned windows." Nellie Maude Slade said it out loud. "I just cleaned this place and I missed the windows." She wasn't apologizing; she was irritated about how much work it was to run this apartment building.

"So, Missy, this is it."

Linda Petteway knew immediately that this was the apartment for her.

"What's that?" Linda pointed to the strange little door behind the stairwell.

"Last guy used it for an office. You have to duck to get in, but once you're in you can stand up."

"No window?"

"No window. Skylight."

"How many square feet is it?"

"I don't know punkin."

This was going to be a very nice place to live, Linda could feel it: two bedrooms, (so she could invite her Wellesley friends to visit), that squirrely office with the skylight where she could put the Singer sewing machine and the bassinet, high ceilings, nine windows and an old sabot bathtub in the bathroom. The living room had a green porcelain chimney like in Europe. The room was large, with old parquet floors. They needed to be renovated of course and the dirty windows with their peeling paint and whistling cracks would have to be taken care of too. She could get out her Windex for now. And the kitchen had space for a little table and looked out into the foliage of an old elm tree. It was for her and her baby boy. She could feel it: she had a boy.

*

It took Linda a week to settle in because cleaning and decorating was a lot of physical work for an expecting mother. She got into the habit of taking a break every day at 5 p.m. to have tea downstairs with the strange old lady who managed the building.

"This place could be so nice if you just invested some time and even a little money in it, Mrs. Slade."

"It ain't mine and the one's owns it don't like to spend his money."

"Well, who is he? Maybe I can talk to him."

"Nope. He don't want to talk to no one."

"Look, then, you tell him for me, then. No one has swept the chimney in years. That's what the chimney sweep said to me when I called him over. He wouldn't even do it without an agreement from the owner. He said he could knock the masonry apart, it's in such bad shape. Now your Mr. Mystery doesn't want his masonry to fall apart does he?"

"So don't sweep the chimney dear."

"No but then you can't use the chimney at all."

"Then don't use it."

"Well look, if there was a fire next door and burning ash went into this chimney, your entire house could burn down."

"If my granny had wheels she'd be a wagon."

"What?"

"But she don't."

"Masonry has already fallen into the living room Mrs. Slade. One time it even burned a black mark on the hardwood floor"

"Don't use the chimney I said. Meow, hello little kitties, let's go get you some dinner."

"What?"

"We're finished dear." She picked up the teacups. "Got to *feed* the kitties."

Linda knew this woman was irresponsible, but she couldn't let it go there. She headed up the stairs to her apartment and sat down in her oversized armchair. She thought about the money she had just received from her inheritance. $47,000 had been left to her by her granddad. She grabbed a notebook and started calculating how much she could afford to invest in this apartment if she was going to buy that sweet little shop-front downtown and fit it out as a tea room and bookstore.

Reasonably, she could make a few improvements. She would call back the chimney sweep and see what it would cost to get the fireplace in working order. The five tall windows in the living room would be replaced. If Mrs. Slade or Mr. Mystery would agree to all that, Linda would pay.

When she had finished decorating the apartment, Linda made an appointment with the real estate agent about the store-front she'd seen downtown.

Her tea shop opened in the heart of Huntsville in December 1971. It shocked the locals' sensibilities. It stood, sweet and insolent, two doors down from lumbering green Fitzsimmons Brothers, that temple of the fat white Alabama oligarchy.

This new "hippy drug den/tea room", *Petteway's*, was a trembling thing by comparison, twittering like its name, a thin building with white lace curtains. Cat Stevens songs wafted through the half open windows on warm and cool days alike.

The establishment was an odd centerpiece for this southern town; but by 1971, Huntspatch, as the Southern ladies called it, had become unquestionably odd.

Years later, Linda Petteway would recount that she had opened the tea room and home decorating shop when a Nashville boy had broken her heart. That's what she told her friends.

Another rumor had it that she had been a stalker in her youth, and had followed the Nashville boy first to Cambridge Massachusetts, and then down to Huntsville when he got an internship at NASA. As she was waiting for a response from him that was never to come, at least not the way she wanted it to, she acquired this little run-down boutique.

But all that was a lie. She had opened it immediately upon arriving from the north, having calculated most practically that it was a good way to earn a steady living. She would have opened it if she had married Trent and had eight children.

At the time you could buy property for a song in Huntsville. And there was just enough of a market for this tea room. The children of scientists working at the arsenal and homesick college kids doing their internships at NASA: they bought cigarette papers and underground magazines and *The New York Times* at Petteway's. Their girlfriends enjoyed the macramé belts, patchouli oil and tarot cards, not to mention a nice cup of tea and a cucumber sandwich. In fact, in 1971, this was the only establishment in town that appealed to the new influx of youth and city folk and as such, *Petteway's* was going to exercise a surprising influence on the style of "The New

Huntsville", for several years the only influence that counterbalanced the Rocket City brand.

Chapter 51: 1933

More radios than people could consume, HH Industries was producing. Times were shaky. Stock built up in the warehouse. Even so, in the two years since William Daniel initiated the big change in Herbert Hunt Industries, Mr. Hunt had not fired a man and had continued to clear a small profit for the company.

What's an asset?

Only once did HH Industries have to clip the weekly payroll. That was in March 1933, when all of the banks throughout the country were closed for a four-day period, and 4,000 banks closed permanently. Mr. Hunt and William Daniel and Miss Pritchard and the engineers and the manufacturing and the packing people had stayed late to listen to the President's address announcing the banking holiday. The twelve men and two women stood around the work table in the warehouse and listened to the President of the United States on their newest model radio:

Ladies and Gentlemen, the President of the United States

Good evening. I want to talk for a few minutes with the people of the United States about banking—with the comparatively few who understand the mechanics of banking but more particularly with the overwhelming majority who

use banks for the making of deposits and the drawing of checks. I want to tell you what has been done in the last few days, why it was done, and what the next steps are going to be. I recognize that the many proclamations from State capitols and from Washington, the legislation, the Treasury regulations, etc., couched for the most part in banking and legal terms, should be explained for the benefit of the average citizen.

"and even the not so average citizen!" someone popped and a couple of the guys laughed.

…the fortitude and good temper with which everybody has accepted the inconvenience and hardships of the banking holiday. I know that when you understand what we in Washington have been about, I shall continue to have your cooperation as fully as I have had your sympathy and help during the past week.

"Sympathy--I don't know about that," Miss Pritchard said.

First of all, let me state the simple fact that when you deposit money in a bank the bank does not put the money into a safe deposit vault. It invests your money in many different forms of credit — bonds, commercial paper, mortgages and many other kinds of loans. In other words, the bank puts your money to work to keep the wheels of industry and of agriculture turning around. A comparatively small part of the money you put into the bank is kept in currency—an amount which in normal times is wholly sufficient to cover the cash needs of the average citizen. In other words, the total amount of all the currency in the country is only a small fraction of the total deposits in all of the banks.

"What is he talking about?"

"Well you knew that didn't you Elroy?" Ray Trent Smith was speaking to his buddy in the engineering department. "But I don't know what commercial paper is. Anyone know what that is?"

"A kind of a loan he said. To a company maybe?" The voice came from the four guys in the back, but you couldn't tell which one.

What, then, happened during the last few days of February and the first few days of March? Because of undermined confidence on the part of the public, there was a general rush by a large portion of our population to turn bank deposits into currency or gold

"Some gold would be good," Elroy snickered.

William Daniel Bell was silent throughout this all. But the remark by Elroy caught his attention. The twenty-two year-old had never thought about it before. Some gold would be good, yes it would. He said nothing.

— a rush so great that the soundest banks could not get enough currency to meet the demand. The reason for this was that on the spur of the moment it was, of course, impossible to sell perfectly sound assets of a bank and convert them into cash except at panic prices far below their real value.

"An asset is?" Elroy was asking

"What you have. What you own. Not your debts. Your cash. Your land." Mr. Hunt said

"That's clear as mud but it covers the ground" Elroy snickered again.

"Shhh!"

…This bank holiday, while resulting in many cases in great inconvenience, is affording us the opportunity to supply the currency necessary to meet the situation. No sound bank is a dollar worse off than it was when it closed its doors last Monday. Neither is any bank which may turn out not to be in a position for immediate opening.

"Wait a minute, how do we know if First National will open and when?" Old Mr. Brown was pretty agitated.

"Well I don't think we do know that Mr. Brown," Mr. Hunt said.

The new law allows the twelve Federal Reserve Banks to issue additional currency on good assets and thus the banks which reopen will be able to meet every legitimate call. The new currency is being sent out by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing in large volume to every part of the country. It is sound currency because it is backed by actual, good assets.

"How long is this going to last?"

"Well I don't think we know exactly Mr. Wilkins. That's why I think we all need to be very careful." Mr. Hunt sat down.

A question you will ask is this: why are all the banks not to be reopened at the same time? The answer is simple. Your Government does not intend that the history of the past few years shall be repeated. We do not want and will not have another epidemic of bank failures.

As a result, we start tomorrow, Monday, with the opening of banks in the twelve Federal Reserve Bank cities—those banks which on first examination by the Treasury have already been found to be all right.

People started to turn away from the radio. They were restless.

On Wednesday and succeeding days banks in smaller places all through the country will resume business, subject, of course, to the Government's physical ability to complete its survey. Let me make it clear to you that if your bank does not open the first day, you are by no means justified in believing that it will not open. A bank that opens on one of the subsequent days is in exactly the same status as the bank that opens tomorrow.

"Woah! What does that mean?"

"That means a number of things Mr. Brown." Mr./ Hunt spoke loud so that everyone at the back could hear him too. " For one, it means I'm heading into town this afternoon to have a talk with Mr. Fitzsimmons"

"Of Fitzsimmons's Haberdashery?"

"No, the president of the bank. I'm going in to see if I can get further information."

We had a bad banking situation. Some of our bankers had shown themselves either incompetent or dishonest in the handling of other people's funds.

"Yeah, well what if Fitzsimmons is one of the crooks?" One of the guys from packing spoke up.

"He could be," Elroy said.

"No, I don't think he is Mr. Wills," Mr. Thomas said. He was Elroy's boss in the engineering department.

"He's a Fitzsimmons." Wilkins was supporting his buddy.

"Okay, let's not play the Hatfield's and the McCoy's." William

Daniel said "Your brother drinks. Do you?"

William Daniel realized that he shouldn't have said such a thing, even before you could see how mad Wilkins was.

"Sorry. I'm sorry Mr. Wilkins."

"Heuh. Well, your Mama's crazy. Are you?"

"Ooh. Let's not do that," Miss Pritchard said.

"Really. Excuse me Mr. Wilkins."

"Excuse yourself Mr. Wilkins" Miss Pritchard put her foot down.

William Daniel looked at Wilkins and realized that he had inflicted a wound that could fester over generations. He shook his head. "I know my Mama's not well. I know it. I love her anyway. Like you love your brother. I really am sorry."

"William Daniel, close your mouth." Miss Pritchard sighed, "You are just making things worse, young man. We don't talk about family problems when we are agitated, gentlemen." Miss Pritchard had no children, but she still knew how to wield authority even with the old guys. William Daniel wondered for a second where she got that gumption.

"So, well, there. There you go." Mr. Hunt took the floor now that the radio was off. "The banks are closed in all of North Alabama. They will be for a week or more. And when they open, we will have to be extremely cautious about taking money out. So, men, I have some cash in the safe to help us get through the next week or the month. Some suppliers will need to be paid in order to keep going themselves. Others will wait. Full salaries cannot be paid until the bank opens, but all sorts of help can be given. We need to know what our immediate requirements are. We are going to look at it right now. Miss Pritchard, Mr. Bell, Mr. Thomas, would you please go square off with about five people and find out what they need, exactly what they need, in cash, in kind, in services. Have you got to see a doctor? Have you got a kitchen garden or have you not got the food you need in the house? Can you share your

resources with someone else? Is your truck working? Is anyone going to come knocking on your door demanding anything? What are the facts, what are the figures? We will have to take only as we need. Because you never know. A week might become a month and it might become two months."

Chapter 52: 2011

66 days in a row

A week becomes a month and a month becomes two months. They say it takes 66 days to make a habit permanent. 66 days in a row: Madison had read it in an article in *The New York Times*. As she drove to work that morning, the idea of habit prowled deep in the background of her mind and the radio hammered on about boots on the ground in Iraq, roadside bombs, Italian forces training in Huntsville. 66 years since WWII. *America has got into the habit of war,* she thought.

Today was the 66th day of her hobby as a private investigator: had she crossed that threshold into habit? It did occur to her that she wasn't particularly good at being the private eye; it did occur to her that she had gotten nowhere in her research on the origin of the money buried in her kitchen garden. Still, she was aware that she had learned some things. She now knew that behind every piece of administrative paper there was an entire hidden life. Questions were not answered, boxes were not checked, and masses of tiny errors betrayed something to be curious about. The difficulty was imagining the facts of the life behind the errors.

It was seven a.m. in the corner office of Bell-Garth Woolson: she read contracts as she did every Friday morning. The errors and typos and overlooked details danced across the pages and taunted her. She wondered whether fifty years from now someone reading these papers would be able to imagine what lay behind the underlined words, inserted commas and circled un-ticked boxes: An architect who didn't like the client. A supplier who refused to give precise answers. An assistant with a sick baby.

At the end of the morning, she changed her shoes and took that healthy walk from Bell-Garth Woolson to the Huntsville Historical Society. This was the point where it came to her that today was the 66th day, the day of permanence, the day where curiosity became no more or less important, no more or less automatic than breathing. And still she didn't have the faintest idea where the money in the bags came from.

True, she only spent about a half an hour to 40 minutes a day in the reference section of the local library or at the Huntsville Historical Society or at City Hall poking through microfilm and playing with these ancient machines. Was that an excuse?

No. Pitiful: she wasn't any surer today what she was looking for than she was when she started. All those errors, unfinished sentences and unchecked boxes led nowhere. Nowhere. 50 years of magazine articles about thefts and drug deals in the Huntsville area, full title searches. Research into the use of mail bags. Staring at photos of two-dollar bills. Nothing from nothing brought nothing.

Two houses kept popping up in her mind. Her own, of course. But also, that house in her dreams. Long and narrow, cat running through it, choking with dust and smoke, a fire within, smothered by kudzu without.

Today she was heading back into 1971. Halloween. *The Huntsville Times*, even when it was a privately owned daily newspaper, loved to live it up over Halloween. Great haunted houses. Madison County's Mysterious Caves. The White Wolf Lady has

appeared again. Madison's eye was flitting over all this nonsense when she caught sight of a picture of the house that stood next to her own. It was on fire, and in the picture, you could see the roof of her own house catching fire too.

TWICKENHAM HOUSE FIRE ON HALLOWEEN

Joanne Tanner, October 31, 1971

Two of the Stately homes of the Twickenham District caught fire on Halloween night, offering a lugubrious spectacle of flames and terrified inhabitants on the upper floors to the Trick-or-Treaters on the prowl for goodies.

Eyewitnesses have said that the fire appeared to have been caused by an over-enthusiastic inhabitant of the second floor with multiple Jack-O-Lanterns and other lit candles in her living room windows. Two burning pumpkins fell out the window, followed by an explosion.

"It wasn't criminal, as God is my witness," stated the owner of the houses, Miss Lee Slate. "Why would I do that? It's everything I own and now I don't know where me and my cats are going to sleep!" Fire chief Dr. Paul Rubin stated that the origin of the fire remains under investigation.

She laughed out loud as she read of the spectacle. No wonder everyone thought it was a show. Then two oddities struck her: 1. What a funny name for a fire chief. And 2. There was that name again. Slate. Why did this Slate person not end up on the Chain of Title for her home?

Maybe it was that Huntspatchers all went nuts at Halloween.

Chapter 53: 1971

Halloween

Linda Petteway used a diaper to dust the bookshelf where she lined up her footed teacups.

She looked out the window across the way to the other gingerbread façade, with its broken bits and flaking yellow and white paint. Now that she had painted this room pale pink and hung lace curtains half way up every window, she no longer noticed the sadness most of the time. A baby lost at eight weeks, well, that wasn't hardly a baby, was it? And Trent was going to come around tonight.

She prepared the dinner and the decoration over a period of three days. On Friday, she spent hours cutting funny demons and autumn leaves and other lovely things into a variety of pumpkins. She had made two particularly amazing Jack O' Lanterns, one tallish with the face a boy who kind of looked sort of like Trent and another lovely little round one with her own image. On Saturday she made the pot roast, which was always better the second day. And on Sunday she made the pigs in a blanket and baked a pumpkin pie with a leafy rim. As night fell, she put little candles on the dining room table and along the mantle of the fireplace. She set the pumpkins on every window sill. Red elm leaves were scattered on

the table. It seemed to her that it was a nice balance of romantic and seasonal decoration. He wouldn't necessarily think it was all for him. She hoped that Trent would think to bring a bottle of wine. And that he would not come with Philip.

He did bring a bottle of German wine, but he also showed up with Philip, that jackass, and she had to set a third place at the table. What did he see in Philip? Why were they always together? Was he protecting himself from her? Trent never even knew she was pregnant: what was there to protect himself from? What was really strange, it occurred to her for the first time, was that Philip didn't seem to mind at all when she left him for his best friend. She had simply 'changed hands' he said.

Dinner was fine. No one noticed all the work she had gone to in order to make it a lovely evening. The two guys had a running conversation about 'assholes at work'. She washed the dishes in her small kitchen and brought out the cognac.

As she stepped out into her living room, Philip was sneering about the blue uniforms they had to wear and Nellie Maude, the building manager, was letting herself in the front door and her black cat was following her.

"Trick or treat! Sounds like y'all're havin' a party here."

"Come on in Mrs. Slade; join us for a piece of pie and some cognac."

The evening wore on, and Philip told Trent a story he had heard about a crazy old self-made man who never went to school. He was purported to have two safes in his garage with gold bars in them.

"That's ol' Billy Dan." Nellie Maude was happy to know something these two well-dressed boys did not know.

"Quaint name," said Philip.

"I know more about him than his name, sweetheart. He's almost family. For generations. I know him real well. He's a one."

"He's a one?" Philip screwed up his face in comic pain.

"He's peculiar, she means, right Nellie Maude?" Linda couldn't believe how rude Philip was at every possible opportunity.

"Yep. He is flippin crazy for gold."

"What ho! what ho! this fellow is dancing mad! He hath been bitten by the Tarantula." Philip was dancing as he said it.

"What the hell are you doing?" Trent wanted to completely disassociate himself from Philip in that moment.

"Dancing like a tarantula. Edgar Allen Poe. *You* know, literary girl."

"Actually, not literary girl. But yeah, I know. It's a line from "The Gold Bug", Trent. Guy gets bit by a tarantula and becomes obsessed with gold."

"Gold bars, that's what he's got. In his garage. Don't like banks much."

"So his family and yours raised pigs together then?" Philip thought he was being funny, in a continental sort of a way.

"Well. Raised kudzu together you could say. He has a Negra for a secretary."

"What the shit is kudzu?" Philip asked

"Naptally something."

"What the fuck is a nap-tally?"

"Watch your mouth Philip." Trent was whining his embarrassment.

"Kudzu is that vine that grows over everything in the woods," Linda answered.

Both boys gave Linda a blank look.

"Have you ever driven out the I-10 towards Mississippi?"

"Well I am just afraid little lady that I have not," mugged Philip.

"Yes we have. That time we went down to New Orleans."

"N'awlins. Say it right." Philip twirled his imaginary mustaches.

"Ok, so you guys, don't you remember, you are driving through the woods and suddenly there aren't any more woods… It's just a carpet of green ivy with little purple flowers and then oops this carpet rises over a tree on one side and down on the other and traipses on for a while before in engulfs another tree?"

"Yeah" Trent said, "I remember that. It kind of worried me. What's eating the trees?"

"That's kudzu."

"So I still don't know what the heck she is talking about. And what's a nap-tally?"

"Me neither." Linda turned back to Nellie Maude for an explanation, but all she saw was Nellie's black cat going out the front door.

Linda felt it was getting hot in the room. She, a girl from the northeast, preferred to live with open windows, especially in mild temperatures like you get in Alabama. So she carefully moved the self-portrait pumpkin and opened the window to get some fresh air.

After a couple of glasses of cognac, Hawkes grew bored and impatient. He started screwing around with her delicate crafts, and dropped the pumpkin with the girl's face out the damned window thinking it was, what, funny? When he did that, the one with the boy's face fell on her carpet and started a fire. Trent responded immediately by throwing his cognac on the fire and then his pants leg caught fire too. As Linda put out that fire the best she could with a kitchen towel, Philip bent over laughing and then launched another Jack O'Lantern out the window. Before too long, all the pumpkins had fallen, the bottles had tipped over, the lace curtains had taken fire, and a trail of burning cognac dribbled towards the kitchen. Something went boom. They called out the window to get someone to call the fire department. Trick or Treaters stood below in awe

of the wonderful spectacle. That was the end of Linda Petteway's dreams of romance.

Chapter 54: 1936

A first time for everything

"Dreams of romance. Hmmph." Naphtali's Mama surveyed the room in front of her.

From where Naphtali stood, which was the front of the room, the hall of Ephesians Baptist Church looked a lot like the Negro waiting room at that hospital in Atlanta where her little sister Sherah had a cast put on her arm last year.

Naphtali had heard her sister cry and yell and yell and cry, but Sister was always crying and yelling. When she went out into the yard to tell her to shut the heck up because Mama couldn't take the noise anymore, Sister Sherah was lying on the ground next to the swing sobbing.

There they were, just like in the waiting room: the worn wooden pews, the green clapboard walls, and the people shifting in their seats, the hats and the little crushed veils. The only difference with that mournful hospital room was the inscription above the door: *I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life.*

Naphtali was 14 and a half years old, and this was her first time for a lot of things. It was the first time everyone in church was

looking at her, and she didn't care for that much. It made her heart beat fast and it made her want to hide. It was the first time she'd had her picture taken, and she was not sure how nice she would look. It was the first time she had been given a bouquet, which was sticky in her half-gloved hands. And the flowers were fading fast. It was the first time she had ever put on a big fancy dress and she was afraid of tripping over the hem and falling flat and getting it all dirty. It wasn't hers. It was some distant cousin's dress.

When she had successfully navigated her way down the aisle after the ceremony, holding tight to the forearm of the boy Edwin Reese Peterson, Naphtali felt relieved.

"Y'all look like a plantation owner's wife. A mistress of your own house." Her old granny Malinda said.

"Yes you do, Mrs. Peterson." Edwin Reese said.

Naphtali wasn't too sure what she thought of that. Did she want to look like those women posing in the old photographs? And was she really a wife now? She looked up at Edwin Reese. He was three and a half years older than her and had got her involved in stuff she didn't understand. But she really liked him anyway. He reached out to take her by the waist.

"Hands to yourself Mr. Peterson!" Granny Malinda was dead serious. "You already done enough work on this girl's life!"

"Don't worry. We're gonna to be ok Mrs. Hickman."

"Hmm."

"I have a spot at Alabama A&M college in Huntsville."

"Ptscheuh! They don't let no boys like you in college!"

"Yes, they do ma'am."

"Hmm. How're you goin' to pay for it?"

"I got a scholarship and we will work, won't we Naphtali?"

"You are not goin' to turn my grandbaby into a praline mammy, boy."

"No no no. We'll find something good, won't we Naphtali? We're gonna stay with my family in Madison County for a bit."

Naphtali's Mama snuck up and snatched a white rose from the bouquet and put it in her own hair. Sister Sherah tried to snatch one too; Naphtali slapped her hand but good.

"You be patient. I'll give you the whole thing after the pictures."

The family returned from church that morning to Granny Malinda's house in the Atlanta suburbs for a big meal. All through that meal, Naphtali was worried about who would take care of her Mama now, who would wash the little ones and mend their clothes and keep the money. She was going to have to have a serious talk with Sherah. Help her to grow some character. A world where Sherah had character. My my. That was a world that didn't exist, simple as that.

Chapter 55: 2011

A world that doesn't exist, simple as that.

It was the first time Madison Bell-Garth had heard his voice in her head since he died. She was vacuuming the dining room, and was confused about the dust and crumbs and unchecked boxes she saw scattered on the floor. She looked out at the back yard of her house, but it wasn't her back yard at all. It was his back yard, flat and treeless, but full of roses. She switched off the vacuum cleaner. The voice was husky and clearly his, the beautiful voice of her grandfather calling across that rose garden from his green Adirondack lawn chair watching her house burn. She looked, stunned over her shoulder at the flames behind her.

"That world doesn't exist anymore Madison."

Papa Billy Dan stood and strode forward into the fire of the kudzu-covered house. Flaming leaves fell on his shoulders. He blew ashes from his fingertips. He stepped away from it, into the open space left before him.

She jumped when he put his hand on her shoulder because it was as hot and fleeting as those burning leaves.

"The house fighting back the kudzu, the fire within, the snakes under the porch and the big old truck, slowly floating towards us in the rain."

And there it was, the truck floating towards the house. Would it hit the porch?

"That's gone. Madison, that's gone. You may think to yourself *I just want to fix that. If I could just do this one thing or these two things it would be all better."*

"But what needs to be fixed?" she asked him. "Nothing needs to be fixed." She could hear a faint whine in her voice.

"If I could just do this one thing or these two things it would be all better." Now the voice was Gran Lulu's coming out of Papa Billy Dan's mouth. *"I would be able to fix the past from the present. I will just lay out the knots on the table in front of me. Open them up gently and see how to untie them. But it's as all better as it's going to be Madison. It is what it is now."*

*"*What needs to be fixed?"

"*The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field,"* said the voice.

And Papa Billy Dan's voice again warmed Madison's sleep. "*And other things are growing over it now, and growing from within. Another world arising, another world gone"*

Chapter 56: 1938

The Lyric Theater

When the Huntsville Police Officer had found Lulu and Granny James asleep under a bush, he brought them into the station and put the old lady in the tank. The little girl was allowed to sit with the officers and draw pictures. That was back in 1930, and this was very bad news for the James household.

In fact, it was the beginning of a long slide into disaster for Madge and her little girl. Granny was put in the funny farm, and her house was sold to pay her keep there. Madge moved in with her cousins the Slades in return for doing the washing and ironing. She got a job a few hours a week at the gas-station to pay some rent. For years she eked out a living for herself and her little girl. The girl was absent a bit from school, but no one from social services came knocking.

Eventually Madge James got a couple of real jobs. Well, real, sort of. Real enough (with her tips) to pay for a little apartment anyway. She first got a spot as cashier and stock worker at Fitzsimmon's Haberdashery. She was in good standing there, because she informally doubled as nanny for the Fitzsimmon twins who ran circles around her all day as she worked. She was indulgent with

the little boys and the Fitzsimmons brothers were tolerant with her. Lulu occasionally came in and laughed with her mama, as the uncontrollable eight-year-olds wreaked havoc around them both.

Then she nabbed a job in the evening as an usherette four nights a week at the Lyric Theater on US highway 231. She was to make the popcorn, tear the tickets and provide a helpful elbow for old ladies. She was to use her flashlight to prevent shenanigans amongst the teenagers and make sure people kept quiet. Finally, she was to clean up the house, the toilets and the lobby before and after the shows. During all this time, Mr. Campbell would sell the tickets, run the projector and do the accounting.

Now when, the first night of her job, she brought her 14-year-old daughter Lulu into work with her, it was not to get extra help she said, but because the cousins with whom they were lodging had said there was an adult birthday party and "it made no sense to invite a little girl." Lulu was incensed. She was not a little girl.

"She'll help me clean up after the show. You'll see: she's a hard worker, Mr. Campbell. You'll be off home to bed lickety-split tonight."

"Yup, alright, but in the future y'all will be doing this job alone, Mrs. James." Red-faced Mr. Campbell looked Lulu up and down. "This is y'all's daughter? Why I'd a thought you was sisters."

"Thank you very much." She pulled Lulu behind her and reached out to shake Mr. Campbell's hand. "You won't regret it."

"Ok. Away you go girls." Lulu's Mama skillfully avoided a slap on the buttocks. Mr. Campbell observed this and stepped into the ticket seller's booth chomping on his cigar.

Mrs. James smoothed Lulu's lovely brown hair into a pony tail, tucking in stray hairs and looking her in the eyes.

"Don't you let him near you, darlin', especially not in the dahk theater."

She pulled a bobby pin out of her own hair and fastened on the red cap with LYRIC THEATER stamped in yellow across the side.

Time passed quickly. Lulu's Mama diligently scrubbed out the popcorn machine and taught her teenager to use her sharp young eyes to find all the spinsters — un-popped bits — in the colorful carpet. And there were scads of them.

Just in time, they finished heating up the "Buttery Popcorn Machine" and setting out the paper sacks. The popcorn popped away. People wandered in, offering their tickets for Lulu to tear and paying five cents for a bag of popcorn to Mrs. James. The first to come in were the white people, who chattered their way down into the orchestra seats and then the colored folks had their tickets torn and clambered up the rickety steps to balcony, mostly without stopping for popcorn.

"The Negros has got the best views," Her Mama whispered. "We'll go get us a seat up there in a corner when everyone's come in and we're finished straightening things out down here and Mr. Campbell has gone to the projection booth."

This was the first time Lulu James had been to the movies and she had no idea what she was in for. They got to their little corner seats shortly after the titles started. "I can't give you anything but love baby." Lulu sang the first line with the music. The black folks around her laughed but her mother slapped her on the knee and shushed her. The movie started with a very handsome man sitting on top of a ladder next to a dinosaur skeleton. Her Mama took the flashlight, adjusted her cap, and told Lulu not to budge unless someone bothered her. Madge started her rounds.

In the 56 minutes that followed, Lulu could see the flashlight sweep across the seats from time to time, and she could hear her mother's "*Hush!"* While she just couldn't tell what was happening in the crazy movie, she laughed and laughed. Lulu was hooked. Before the end of the film she was somewhere in a jail with a lot of silly people, and her Mama came and grabbed her hand and said *Gotta go! Gotta go!*

It was time to clean up so the boss could leave early. They filled a paper bag with the leftover popcorn for Mr. Campbell and

watched people file out. When everyone was gone, they picked up trash from the balcony and the orchestra.

"Every sack, every cigar and cigarette butt, but especially every single spinster!" said Mr. Campbell, "Because we are not here to feed the rats."

As they were doing the final work with the sweeper in the lobby, a tall skinny young man came in, slipped upstairs and knocked on the door of the projection booth. Madge was not sure what to do about this. Was she supposed to stop him? She heard the conversation start and was relieved.

"Well, young master Bell, how's it going?"

"Just fine, Mr. Campbell. Coming by to see how the new sound system is working out for y'all."

"T's good! Good, good. Got a new marquee up. Don't interfere with the waves anymore."

"Well, the old one probably wouldn't've interfered with the sound system anyway. Just with radio Huntsville. It's WBHP that'll be happy about that."

Lulu watched the thin young man leave with great curiosity. He seemed familiar to her.

"What you starin' at Darlin'?" her Mama whispered in her ear.

"I don't know."

Over the following years, Lulu came many a Friday night to help her mother, without ever seeing the young man again. But as she handed out the Fiesta Ware on "dish night" she thought about him, when she confronted children trying to sneak into the theater from the back door she wondered if she would have children and what their father would be like. And then, when she helped old Mrs. Wallace to her seat on Friday evenings if she came to the movies without her son, Lulu prayed that she would not ever be a helpless old woman. She cleaned, scrubbed and collected spinsters and stayed away from Mr. Campbell, who never complained about

her presence again. And she watched screwball comedies from her corner seat, usually missing the beginning and the end of the shows.

One night she happened into her seat early, and sat watching the huge heads of President Roosevelt, and then ex-President Hoover talking about something that had happened in Germany, but she couldn't really tell what it was. It was called the night of the broken glass, and a lot of Jewish people had their homes and hospitals and religious places destroyed. There was something about a boy who shot someone. But she had missed the beginning and didn't understand the story. And then the movie started.

Chapter 57: 2011

Madison Bell-Garth, woke up heavy with the sense that *"The past cannot be fixed from the present,"* but she didn't have the slightest idea what that meant. And throughout the day there was a small part of her mind that kept turning that sentence over and over as she carried out her responsibilities as head of Bell-Garth Woolson, as she inspected all the contracts and proposals, drawings and models that crossed her desk.

At lunchtime she was relieved to get out of the office and take a brisk walk, shake this dusty idea out of her mind.

200 West Side Square: it was the young woman, and not the CEO who stood at the front door of *The Huntsville Times* offices. She was feeling suddenly vulnerable. The Receptionist was gone. The building was mostly empty, and it looked like *The Huntsville Times* wouldn't be there for long.

Madison saw someone inside, and gently pushed the door to see if she could step in. The doors chimed, but the guy sitting at his Mac didn't look up from what he was typing. Smoke arose from his cubicle. She couldn't tell what he looked like from the counter where she waited, except that his hair was a little too long, dusted with grey and perhaps unwashed. Now his voice was urgent.

"Be with you in a minute Mr. Peabody."

Madison found that odd. It was an expression Lulu used sometimes and always in good cheer.

When finally he wiped his mop out of his eyes and got up to speak to her, Madison felt disarmed. His hair caught her eye: *Very dark grayish brown silt. Silk. What am I saying?* He was an intense looking guy. Taller than she had expected. *Why would I expect anything at all?* Athletic. *Wonderful man*. The words ran through her mind as if someone were whispering to her. She looked down at the file in her hands.

"Sorry to bother you on your lunch break."

"I don't take a lunch break. What can I do for you?"

"Ok, um, I'm not too sure where to start. I'm doing some research on a little family mystery."

"I don't know anything about genealogy."

"No it's not that. It's about who owned my house in the past." He stayed quiet, giving her permission to continue. "Here look, I've got this old article from *The Huntsville Times*. 1972. Mentions the owner of my home maybe and maybe of the house next door? Anyway such an owner's name does not end up on the full chain of title of either house when I pull it up."

"Mm. I'm not sure I know what a full chain of title is."

"Oh, it's technical document. Just means the full list of everyone who has ever owned a property."

He looked at her a little longer than she expected him to.

"Mm hmm." he finally said.

"Any idea why that could be?"

"Lemme see it. God. Jo Tanner! She just passed away. She was cantankerous, but I liked her. She was good at her job." He read the article quickly.

TWICKENHAM HOUSE FIRE ON HALLOWEEN

Joanne Tanner, October 31, 1971

Two of the Stately homes of the Twickenham District caught fire on Halloween night, offering a lugubrious spectacle of flames and terrified inhabitants on the upper floors to the Trick-or-Treaters on the prowl for goodies.

Eyewitnesses have said that the fire appeared to have been caused by an over-enthusiastic inhabitant of the second floor with multiple Jack-O-Lanterns and other lit candles in her living room windows. Two burning pumpkins fell out the window, followed by an explosion.

"It wasn't criminal, as God is my witness," stated the owner of the houses, Miss Lee Slate. "Why would I do that? It's everything I own and now I don't know where me and my cat's gonna sleep!" Fire chief Dr. Paul Rubin stated that the origin of the fire remains under investigation.

"So which name is that? Mrs. Lee Slate?"

"Yup."

"Hmm. I'd say there are two or three possibilities. 1. Jo made a mistake about the identity of Lee Slate and she was not the owner. 2. Jo got the spelling wrong, which can happen in the heat of action. 3. The house was "not exactly" Lee Slate's property, her kids owned it, or the company she worked for set up some sort of a deal to buy it with her or something like that. 4. That makes it four possibilities: Lee Slate lied. That's my guess, but we can only guess, 'cause Jo done gone to meet her maker."

"Ok." Madison avoided her impulse to chuckle. "That's helpful. That's helpful. I should be able to do something with that." She avoided looking at him: she moved her finger to the end of article. "And look at the name of the fire chief. Dr. Paul Rubin? Doesn't that seem strange to you?"

"Lots of fire department officials were volunteers in the past, you know. That one was a medical doctor. I think he's still alive. But he's in a home. Not sure he could help you."

"Ok. Ok. Now I've got another one a little bit like this. But a lot

older. And I think my question doesn't have an answer."

He looked at her and shook his head.

"Can you take five minutes with me? It's really important."

She looked directly into his eyes and felt intrusive and exposed at the same time. He looked at the counter.

"Whatta ya got?"

"It's this thing…" She passed him the photocopy of a torn and yellowing newspaper article.

THE KID AND THE JUDGE AND THE HOMESTEAD

Clayton Waller of *The Huntsville Times*, June 1929

A seventeen-year-old boy stood face-to-face with judge and lawyers in a debate this week about ownership of a rundown cabin on a small parcel of land in the woods of Madison County. The boy mastered the major and the minor arcana of the legal theory of private ownership in a speech that boggled the minds of the audience and Judge Milton Berry.

Asked why he rather than his father or mother was standing before the court, the boy stated, cool as a cucumber, that his mother was mentally ill and his father was dead. He was allowed to continue.

He explained to the court and to this reporter that an ancient law – one related to homesteading -- gave him the right to take legal possession of the land and cabin he and his family had diligently restored, because the previous owners (Mr. Grant Slade's family) had abandoned it and he had taken full legal responsibility for it, paying taxes on it and maintaining and improving the property for a full ten years. He stated that in line with the requirements of the law, he had created "substantial enclosure" — fencing to control kudzu — cultivation and improvement of the land. Further, he argued, he largely met the general requirement of "open and notorious actual occupancy" of the land and the buildings "he" had improved for eleven years.

The judge pointed out that he had paid rent on that land for one year, which would make his claim impossible. But the boy stated that to "counterbalance that irregularity" he would be willing to pay for the land (but not the habitation, which he considered he had built) the market price of 51 dollars cash.

In the audience rooting for him were the boy's employer, Mr. Herbert Hunt, and his school teacher Alabama Suffragette Miss Nora Spencer as well.

The man in just shook his head.

"Nora Spencer was a relative of mine." Madison was grasping for something to explain her interest.

"Ok. So…"

"Why is there no mention of the name of the boy who went to court to take this house in the woods?"

"Minor."

"What?"

"Probably because he was a minor."

Chapter 58: 1944

Politics with a small 'p'

From where he stood, William Daniel Bell could make out the chain link fence that marked the end of the military corridor between his property and the secret base in the woods. The US Army Corps of Engineers had taken charge of clearing the kudzu, razing his childhood home and what remained of the Slade place in exchange for a ten-year lease on twenty acres of land and enough money to buy a solid house in the suburbs of Huntsville. And there it was, the land was free at last: flattened, clean and useful.

He turned around to see the small group of people waiting for him with the giant scissors to cut the ribbon and initiate the... what? He didn't even know what they were celebrating. This was a waste of money to mark, not even publicly, a transaction. A business transaction, a patriotic transaction maybe. Mr. Hunt had come, and that was very kind of him. His hair had turned completely grey since he passed the company on to young Bell.

That bumbling mayor and that nasty chief of police were lingering about in front of young Charles and Henry Fitzsimmons, as if their professional lives depended on the teenagers' approval. Bell thought of Charlie and Hank as a couple of pale, overdressed and over-excited boys. The photographer was poised with his big contraption to take a picture, and the owner of the Times, Jacob

Pierce, was standing next to him scribbling notes. What were they going to do? Publish a picture of the secret spot on the cover of *The Huntsville Times*?

Then there was that young Irish major ogling the beauty queen. What a creep. There was something touching about the girl wearing the big green sash. She must have been all of 18 years old, gangly he would have said. Very uncomfortable to be looked at. How did she end up a beauty queen? Was she beautiful? She had a bright and quick look in her eyes and was far too young for him. But he might go over and say hello to discourage McPherson from behaving like such a predator.

"So what do you think we are doing here Miss Anniston?"

"Spencer. My name is Spencer. I was Miss Anniston. They make me wear this thing everywhere I go."

"Yeah, I guessed as much."

This made her laugh, and her laugh relaxed him.

"And I don't know what we are doing here. Do you?"

"Politics Miss Spencer. Some kind of stupid politics."

"Politics. Not stupid. We live in a democracy."

"Politics with a small p. That's what moves Politics with a big p in Alabama."

"Not only. My aunt was an Alabama Suffragette. She got the vote for women. They closed poor houses. They stopped child labor."

William Daniel's face lit up. This must be Miss Nora Spencer's niece.

"William Daniel Bell, would you get your old coon's ass over here so we can finish this ceremony?"

"Watch your language Mayor Tillerson," He called back. He couldn't bring himself to budge immediately. He looked down at his feet and back up at Miss Spencer. "Gotta go, Miss Spencer.

Gotta go play politics."

Chapter 59: 2011 HPD

If you really listen to the rain, Detective Penn was thinking, if you really listen to the rain, you can hear a rhythm in it, a rhythm similar to the movement of the little waves that rocked his bass boat on the Tennessee River. He looked out his window over the top of Fitzsimmons Brothers into the distance. The rain clouds were moving in waves. Out boredom or in judgment, God had dropped a big rock into the lake of clouds above Huntsville Alabama today. Eugene took out the electronic metronome he kept in his desk drawer where he kept some weird bits of equipment. He clicked it on. The rhythm was very, very slow, but it was definitely there, as if time had emerged from the waves of clouds moving in from Mississippi.

He swiveled around to look at his incident board. The persons of interest on this board just did not hold onto his imagination and the witnesses were mostly long gone. There were a few wild cards in the story — that is, some unidentifiable participants. But nothing matched up. Nothing clicked.

Person of interest 1: Madison Bell-Garth: co-owner of the property where all that money was found. She was doing research; she called him from time to time to see where things are going.

Person of interest 2: Mrs. William Daniel Bell. The Chief's secretary Colleen had eventually coughed up some important facts. Mrs. Bell's husband had been conned at around the same time the

postal bags were buried. The dollar amount matched. Oh, it was a couple of hundred dollars off. That just meant it was pocket change for someone. The perpetrators were caught within 36 hours, but the money had disappeared. Each of them accused the other of having disposed of the cash.

Person of interest 3: Trent Benson: The "good cop" con-man who took William Daniel Bell for his mark. He had collaborated with the state very early and got off with a suspended sentence. Still something always seemed incomplete about his collaboration.

Person of interest 4: Philip Hawkes: The "bad cop" con-man. Son of the billionaire Houston Hawkes. Harvard lawyers had managed to get the case dismissed on a technicality. Philip was a kid at the time. Today he was a television news anchor.

Following the rhythm of the showers outside, Penn looked from witness to witness. He tried to follow the rhythm exactly, not to allow himself to think too much, but just to scan and move and scan and move. He was hoping this hypnotic movement would shake something loose.

Witness 1: Glen Garth, witness to the discovery of the postal bags. He had called his buddy, Chief Manville, when he started to dig up the loot. Manville said they weren't buddies. Initially, Penn wondered if he could be more than a witness. But all this took place before Garth was born.

Witness 2: Madison Bell-Garth, discovered the postal bags in her kitchen garden. See above.

Witness 3: Dr. Paul E. Ruben, chief of the fire brigade present at the Halloween night fire at Bell-Garth's place in 1971, the year before the con. He was 96 years old and physically spry, but his mind had apparently taken leave of his body.

Witness 4: Miss Lee Slate, owner (?) of the house that burned down at Halloween 1971 and almost took down what was now the Bell-Garth's place next door. No other trace of this person

Wild card 1: Unidentified renters at the two Halloween-fire homes

Wild card 2: Someone who buried the money AND the bar of silver. It was apparently neither Benson nor Hawkes. But why was it not Benson or Hawkes?

Wild card 3: Someone at the post office who provided the post office bag.

The big wild card in this story was of course, why did it matter? Why wouldn't it just go away, like the non-event it was? Forty-year-old money was lost on the justice system. Unless there was blood somewhere in this story. Or unless it really was part of the con.

Soon there was no more rain, just wind, stronger and stronger, with gusts following more or less the same rhythm as the rain.

Wild card 5: Multiple witnesses of that strange fire next to Mrs. Bell-Garth's house in 1971. Should he put an ad in the paper to get witnesses in here? Would they remember anything of value?

Wild card 6: Someone who had owned or loaned or rented a vehicle to move the money.

Wild card 7: Someone who had perhaps moved the loot from another location

Wild card 8: The missing private dick.

"The missing private dick??" Ewell Clardy put his coffee down on Eugene's desk and broke his concentration. "What does that mean? Is your private dick missing Penn?"

"Oh just shut up Ewell," Bertine said.

"Get your coffee off my desk," Eugene snapped.

The private dick. Why didn't Mrs. Bell-Garth hire a private investigator? She knew that HPD had no more budget on this thing. And she had the money. Or at least some money. She was a busy CEO. Why fiddle around with something she knows nothing about?

Was she the sort of woman to clean her own house? To repair her own electricity?

"Actually, you're right Penn," Ewell said. "Why is she doing her own investigation on this thing? Is she afraid a professional will find out something compromising?"

"Follow the money boys. Always follow the money." That was the first time Bertine had said anything directly to Penn in weeks. The rain started pounding in waves again.

"Shit, the back parking lot is going to flood. And double shit I left my window cracked. Shit shit shit shit." Clardy threw on his raincoat and ran.

"Why can't you guys just get used to searching for the precise word you need to express your frustration or disbelief or anger at yourselves? *Blast it! Rats! Balderdash! Great balls of fire, what have I done?* It would be so much more fun to listen to you. Anyway, Gene, follow the money. Check some bank accounts."

Detective Penn didn't want to acknowledge her, but he spoke anyway, surprised to hear the stupid words come out of his mouth.

"Well that's your *thang* in'it?"

"It is. By the way, Wild card five should be Wild card 4. Et cetera"

He pulled his cigarettes out of his breast pocket and stood up.

"In fact your whole list is illogical. Really there are only two choices about the way things happened: 1. The thieves… " Manville was always appearing out of nowhere.

"con men" Bertine corrected.

"con men, okay, 1 the con men buried it there. And 2 the family buried it there."

"You no longer think the money could have come from mysterious 'H' the Mafioso?" Eugene asked.

"Well. No." The chief said it slowly.

"Did anyone claim insurance for this loss?" Bertine asked.

"Now there's a question," Manville said. "Kobehi, why don't you check into that? And Penn, check in with Mrs. Bell-Garth. I think we should prepare to interview old Mrs. Money Bags. That won't cost us anything."

"Billable hours." Bertine Kobehi answered. "Billable hours."

"We'll bill it as training hours for you. You'll observe."

Chapter 60: 1972

This "friendship" with Trent and that creepy tagalong Phil exhausted Linda. She wanted to call it off, to be unavailable. But every time she saw her Trent, her heart went out to him. She feared for his karma, hanging around with this prick. And Linda seriously did not like having Philip around her property since he started the fire in the Twickenham apartment. It had climbed up into the un-swept chimney, burned the roof off and destroyed some of her furniture. It set fire to the house next door too, and it forced her to move immediately into the apartment above her tea room that she had hoped to convert into a book shop.

But when Trent came over, he was always with his buddy. So, she decided to pretend it was like he was coming over with his dog. She no more spoke to Philip than she would have spoken to a Scottish terrier. Three cups were laid out on the table, three spoons, tea in the pot, honey in a jar, no comment to the dark one.

When she considered why Trent might go around with Philip everywhere, she just had the impression he was bored. They didn't seem to like their jobs at NASA; and while they never said it explicitly, it seemed that they were having some problems getting their work done. No one treated them with any respect, Philip said.

"Not even that Jap teenager with the long hair."

"Hoshi just looks younger than us," Trent said. "And I don't think he's disrespectful. He's just kind of impatient."

"He's a prick. A Jap prick."

"Elegant analysis," said Linda.

The problem was apparently that they were students not scientists. It didn't seem to help any that they were MIT students, because they were not really math freaks, Linda had noticed. Then they had to wear weird blue suits all the time. That really got on Philip's nerves.

What irritated Trent was the Alabama natives on staff who had all been there for twenty years and who were really damned aggressive he said. They might think they were scientists or engineers or technicians, but they were just nasty rednecks.

When the boys came over to Linda's place, they would have noisy conversations, or rather Philip would go into noisy monologues that he allowed his buddy to intrude on from time to time; she would put out walnuts and pecans and almonds and serve tea and try to engage Trent. It bothered her; she always felt like she was not present unless she pressed in, ignoring Philip and forcing Trent to respond.

One evening when they showed up, Philip was particularly bored and Trent was particularly tired of NASA.

"What the bejeezus was my father thinking sending me to MIT?"

"And what the bejeezus was I thinking following you there?" Philip was serious for a split second.

"I could have been happy at Harvard," Trent continued. "Joined a frat. Made my way through with Cs. Gone to law school somewhere else. Or something."

Linda felt compassion for him.

"I think you would have enjoyed business school Trent." She tried to get him to look at her as she spoke. "It's not too late, you know. It's all about common sense, in fact. The math is pretty simple, you can do all sorts of fun things with it."

"I don't know."

Philip played with Linda's nutcracker collection during this conversation: Painted Soldiers, iron squirrels, dragons and so on. He cracked nut after nut and popped each one into his mouth as the other two spoke.

"I thought I was literary. That's what girls in Massachusetts are supposed to be. But I wasn't. I found that out at Wellesley. I don't really like to read. I don't like to think about why other people do like to read or write or whatever. But I really like business."

"Yeah?"

"Or maybe you would like to be a football coach. What do you think of that?"

"Or maybe he'd just like to be a rich lazy bum."

Linda had hoped Philip was more engrossed in the toys so she could speak freely. But she guessed that wasn't going to work. She didn't look at him. Maybe he would go up in smoke.

"You really don't have to stay in this job or this school if it makes you unhappy. Just tell your dad you're going to do something else."

"Where's he gonna sleep if Daddy is not paying his room and board?"

"Philip! Stop being an asshole immediately." She said it like she would have said "Bones! Get off the couch immediately!"

Philip didn't even notice what she had said. Something on the shelf caught his attention: a large silver cube with a hole in the middle of it; you put the nut in, turned a corkscrew that made the walnut eventually disappear completely, pressing against a sort of door. You heard the cracking and you twisted and twisted and let go, and pop! It was now a perfect silver cube, with six smooth surfaces. And then you pressed a round door on one side to let the shell drop out, and tapped on another side to let the shelled nut out.

"Now this is a bitchin thing," he said. "Linda, here you have got a bitchin thing."

Linda raised her eyebrows, because he never called her by name. Ever.

Chapter 61: 1944

Madge opened her eyes and watched the grey outside her window swell towards morning light. Most days, ten minutes before the alarm rang, her eyes popped open and she considered whether it was really time to get up again or not. Today it was. She would let Lulu sleep 30 minutes beyond the alarm. She pushed the quilt off her side of the sofa bed and gently stepped into her slippers. She felt the old socks tied in knots into her hair. Two had fallen out, but they were at the back, so her hair would be fine today. Anyway, she would be covering it with a bandana for her morning work on the assembly line.

In the kitchen, she bathed standing in a basin, careful not to touch her hair. This arrangement was a lot of discomfort for nothing Lulu said. May as well go to the county pool every afternoon, pay five cents and get a real cold shower and have a swim. But Lulu was a teenager and there was no way to convince her that five cents after five cents after five cents added up. The water was heating for coffee and Madge poured some of it onto her washcloth to clean her face and her armpits with something warm.

Lulu slept soundly like 17-year-olds do. The stream of water in the sink and the hush of steam building up in the electric kettle never seemed to disturb her.

Madge's overalls had worn comfortable in the past few months. But they were never comfy at the beginning of the week. She washed them on Saturdays and dreaded donning them on Monday

mornings because after drying on the inside clothesline they were stiff and scratchy and cold and sometimes just a little damp.

She was ready to go.

"Rise and shine!" She kicked the sofa bed where Lulu was still sprawled in sleep. Lulu didn't respond, so Madge patted her on the shoulder and spoke into her ear. "Rise and shine punkin."

"What?"

"You need to get up before I walk out that door, teenager."

It had been 13 years since Tony James had taken off, 13 years that Madge and Lulu had awakened together every single morning in a world of girls and women. Their own little world. Their own little world. That's how she thought of it. Their own little world where she did not have to try to figure out if Tony was lying again, if he was spending their money on beers down at the bar.

Also, their own little world, where she did not have to follow all the time, say yes, yes, yes. Where no one confronted her about anything ever. Well, until Lulu became a 17-year-old no one confronted her anyway.

She used to think that "independence" would mean she could relax sometimes, take a day off, listen to the radio. Now, well, she didn't even have the time to be thinking this thought.

"Is there any coffee?" Lulu was standing up in her high heeled satin slippers, but she was still groggy enough to give the impression she might fall off of them.

"Plenty I think. And have an apple. They are good this week!"

Lulu scratched the back of her head and tightened the knot on a sock tied into her auburn curls.

"What does that mean they are good this week?"

"Last week they were bruised and mushy. Oh, forget it. Gotta get in before the bell."

Madge closed the door behind her and locked it

"You've got your keys, right?" She said through the closed door.

"Yeah. Yup. Here they are."

With that, Madge James stepped out towards bus-stop to take the Number 81 to the Arsenal, where she would pick up the military bus to that base out in the woods of Madison County. She was working on a project initiated by HH Industries. Something about radios and radars, but she only had a tiny job with a little component, so she didn't know exactly what that was.

As she walked, she thought that, now with all the young men in Alabama gone to war, it was not only their own little world that felt the absence of men, it was all of their neighborhood and most of their city.

Chapter 62: 2011

The right story

"That's the sort of reporter I bloody well need."

Jake said it out loud although he was for all intents and purposes alone in the newsroom. He slowly scrolled down the whole length of the article on Bloody Bette, the failed novelist, the failed academic, and the seething fury and frustration that led to "mass murder" at the University of Alabama, Huntsville. Well, not mass murder. A shooting spree: one victim short of a mass murder and it sounded like you were out having fun on a Saturday afternoon.

"Fine, fine article anyway."

The author had been everywhere and spoken to everyone and had pulled it all together into the great crime story it was. Jake ticked off in his head what the expense report for such an article would look like. Travelling back and forth from New York to Ohio to Boston to Huntsville, hotels, rental cars, inviting all manner of people out to lunch. And more. "I bet the guy expensed at least one tux rental and tickets to the damned opera." Expensive work. But very very good.

Still, the article lacked the sense of desperation an intellectual could feel in Huntsville, especially when the intellectual was a second-rate scientist. You couldn't go to a cocktail party without feeling like a damned fool. The place was overrun with folks who were the scientific stars of Heidelberg University, University of California and MIT. And their spouses, who were the stars of somewhere else. Hard-working university professors, when polite, were greeted with a smile and a nod. When rude, and Bloody Bette

was rude, they were either ignored or taken apart and not put back together again. The author had missed this. This perspective, if explored and questioned, would have turned his very very good piece into a Pulitzer Prize winning story.

Or at least the right story. The right story shines a bright light onto the way things are in this moment. The right story, with its unrelenting questions about the past, changes the course of the future. But only a very few people in this damned town were awake to the future. The vast majority of people were either obsessed with their current position in this weird society or locked into a Confederate past they lied to themselves about.

Jake smashed out his cigarette and blew his frustration out with that last puff of smoke. He felt out of place. He had neither the time nor the resources to do what he was capable of doing.

He waved away the cigarette smoke and sat back from his Mac looking off towards the end of the open space offices of *The Huntsville Times*, watching a few distant heads bob above their laptops. "Keep your eye on the ball" he mumbled. Someday, this newspaper would be back in his family, that was the plan. And then they would do some reporting.

Someone suddenly stood up. It was lunchtime. Did they notice the smoke? They were 50 feet away. They probably noticed it. He waved the air again to disperse it.

How would he be able to find a soul capable of that unrelenting questioning that makes a great reporter? Where was he going to find that? Of course, he didn't have the resources *Wired* or *The Atlantic* had, not the money, not the powerful contacts. But with all the brains in this town, why were there no first-rate reporters? The last woman he interviewed for a job had a good journalism degree, felt like a serious writer and crashed and burned when he asked her the last question. It had given him goose bumps.

"If you could write anything at all, what would it be?"

"Creative non-fiction." She was clearly quite satisfied with her

response.

"What would that be?" He raised his eyebrows and smiled a bitter smile.

"Well, non-fiction that is creative."

"Mm hmm. For example?"

"Mm, for example, from your generation, *All the President's Men.*"

"Well, I will skip the 'your generation' stuff. I will assume you know when it was written and that I don't look as old as Jason Robards. I'll skip that. What do you mean by creative in this example?"

"I mean, like the way it starts, here we are in the dark underground garage … the characters, the pace, the suspense… It's better than, I don't know, *House of Cards!"*

"*House of cards* is a TV series. It's frightfully episodic. And the book opens with Bob Woodward being awakened by a telephone call."

"Well, you know, the characters were so tough and real."

"There were no characters. There were real people. They were not created, they were reported. Or, if you like, *observed*."

Jake decided to try her out with a story on "Big Changes in the Huntsville School Transportation Services." She wrote three paragraphs following the standard journalism school format, including a moderately interesting personality sketch of a local bus driver. But she gave no thought to what more crowded school busses with fewer monitors would mean, interviewed no users and showed a complete indifference to clear pronoun reference. So much for creative nonfiction. So much for curiosity. He'd use her again freelance, but he would have to encourage her to keep asking questions and to reread her stories more carefully.

He started filling in her job profile form on the computer. Which of the stories that he needed could she write?

Behind him, the chimes of the front door. Hadn't someone locked it for lunch? The reception door slapped shut and a woman's voice said, "*Excuse me?"*

"Be with you in a minute Mr. Peabody," He replied.

It was frustrating, he would have to come back to this later, and he might not remember what his precise intentions were.

He looked up, and there was Kate Middleton poking her head into the room. No, it wasn't Kate Middleton unless she had put on a few pounds. Probably a subscription cancellation was his guess. But the woman seemed worried.

Chapter 63: 1973

Confidentiality

Don Miller found a comfortable position on his motel bed for feeding a baby squirrel with an eyedropper. He'd been in the woods with a couple of guys from the Farm and one of them had picked up this baby squirrel fallen from its nest.

"Yeah, it is cute." Don had snapped. "But you just killed this animal. His mother will no longer feed him because he smells like you. How could you be so stupid?"

He'd picked up the tiny guy, named him Bruce, and put him in his pocket.

"You'll be ok Bruce. Hang on, tiger."

WTOP Eyewitness news flashed on the television screen with its psychedelic opening. "Are pot smoking hippies making the news in Washington D.C. now? Good God, Bruce, look at that!" Hot pink and khaki colored art work, flashing the words THE PEOPLE'S CHOICE and then pixelized photographs of the cameraman and the reporters doodled across the screen. Nancy would have liked it. Don just shook his head. The little animal had stopped eating and was looking very tired. He checked its pulse, and realizing he didn't know what its pulse should be, he gingerly placed the baby squirrel back in its shoe box filled with shredded newspaper. "Sleep tight Bruce. Good night, tiger."

He pulled his briefcase out from under the desk and opened it. The procurement proposal was an inch and a half thick and imposing. On the cover, the confidentiality notice had a typo that he was going to have to doctor. And he needed to reread the whole thing one last time. He moved to turn off the TV, but something

was happening.

CBS EVENING NEWS AT SIX O'CLOCK WITH OUR CORRESPONDENT IN WASHINGTON, DAN RATHER!

"Kid looks eighteen. He could use some bench work."

"May 15th: Alabama governor George Wallace has been shot at a campaign rally in Maryland."

"Oh no. Ah shit."

Don did not even stop to wonder if Wallace was dead. Actually, dead or alive was pretty much the same thing in this case.

"Now those God damned KKK guys in Huntsville will go nuts. Start burning things down. Oh shit."

The phone rang. Don lowered the volume on the TV and picked up.

"Hello." There was no answer. "Hello?" He started to hang up when a voice said something.

He responded:

"Hello? Allo! Bah dis donc! Comment t'as eu ce numéro?" He listened while the person on the other end explained where he got the telephone number. The conversation continued in French "Well, yeah. I'm here to see some people. And you? How long has it been? Five, six years since we spoke?" Don peeked into the shoebox, where Bruce the baby squirrel slept. Then something got his attention. "I'm a little surprised that you would contact me with this sort of information." He looked intent.. "Well, by you, I mean your organization of course." He grabbed a pen to write something and then thought better of it. "Ah. Uh-huh. Yeah, sure it interests us." He slipped one finger behind the heavy motel drapes to spy down onto the street below. "How many times?" Apparently, there was no one in the street observing his room. "What kind of resources do you think they are putting into it?" He tapped the pen on the top of the television. "Of course, I understand. A ballpark figure." He shook his head in disbelief. "And where's this site? You have the

coordinates?" He went to stand near the door to listen to what was happening in the hallway. When he heard nothing, he continued. "No of course it doesn't have an address, the coordinates. Latitude, longitude." He focused his attention closely on what was being said to him again. "Great. Thanks. Ok. Ok. How is that spelled? Is there really an 's' at the end?" Don wrote down one word and one consonant. *Remote v "*Well thanks JP... Get back to me tomorrow. I'll let you know. Thanks, really"

Don sat down, wrote three words and picked up the phone again.

"Hello, Ken Brown's office please. I think it's 2031. Yeah. Thanks."

Don watched the images of shocked witnesses to the Wallace assassination attempt. He saw them scramble over and over again across the parking lot. He saw them cry from up close and speak to the newsman who had been there to report on a banal campaign stop and found himself in the middle of an historic moment.

"Yeah, hi, Ken, it's Don Miller here. Yeah, I'm watching the news." He listened as Ken went on rather loud about it all. "Yep, God damned idiots. Listen, Ken, I just got a very strange telephone call from our French connection from on down Fiji way." He listened again. "Yeah, that was odd. He gave some sort of an explanation but really I have no idea how he got my hotel phone number. I wonder if Nancy gave it to him. Yeah. I know. I know." He pressed the power button on the TV. "… well, I'm thinking maybe when I come in to talk to you tomorrow, we should bring someone else in on this particular conversation. No. No problem waiting till tomorrow. It's not a dangerous thing. Let's talk then. 9 a.m.? Ok. See you there."

As soon as he hung up the telephone rang again. He didn't know whether to be irritated or alarmed.

"Oh my God Don, did you see that?" It was his wife Nancy on the phone.

"Yeah I did. I did. What a mess. Some idiot was thinking this

would be better for Alabama."

"Look like there's a fire down towards Drake."

"Fires will be happening. Did you give someone my phone number here?"

"Yeah. A guy with a French accent."

"Don't give people my phone number when I'm in Washington Nancy."

"Yeah, right, ok." Nancy was distracted by something she saw out the window. "Let's hope they're not burning crosses. When are you coming home?"

Chapter 64: 1946

Get us out of here.

People were burning swastikas in front of their house. Emma and Fritz Lupau knew they had to get out of Germany as quickly as they could. Revenge had come their way. From complete strangers. People who had no idea that they had nothing to do with their high profile Nazi uncle, people who did not know they had been part of the Christian underground. Who didn't care. Emma had been raped three times in front of Fritz. He knew damned well she wouldn't have the energy to move out of the country unless he did something. She had attempted suicide twice. But he had the energy. He knew his Nazi uncle, a physics professor at Heidelberg University, had gotten out. Karl Lupau and his wife and children were flown to New York, where uncle Karl said they lived in a fine hotel near "Grand Central-Park" for many weeks. Soon after, they were taken to some God forsaken town in the middle of nowhere to work on a secret project.

Like many academics, Karl had colluded with the Gestapo to keep his job. He denounced Jewish grad students. They were dead. He signed petitions to eliminate colleagues from academia. They were dead. Lurking in his conscience was the knowledge that family members who had done nothing but passively exist were now being caught and beaten to death in the streets because of him. This, Karl Lupau regretted. His nephew Fritz who he had suspected to be part of the resistance was probably dead by now too: if one group didn't get him, another would.

Emma and Fritz were alive though: they had been housed temporarily in the local concentration camp liberated several months earlier. It had become safer to stay inside, but Fritz left one day to post a letter to his uncle. *Get me out of here. Get us out of here. We'll be illegal. We won't tell anyone you helped us. But help.*

Emma trembled when the letter came back from El Paso Texas U.S.A. It was from Uncle Karl. He had sent an American check signed by someone he had never heard of. Fritz didn't know how long that money would take to clear, but he knew that if they kept their heads down for a month or so, they were out of the hell hole.

Chapter 65: 2011

Mr. Familiar

Gran Lulu was setting out her jolly blue and green Fiesta Ware teacups on the coffee table.

"This was my mother's. Or it was ours. We stole it from the Lyric Theater when Mama got fired."

"Why did she get fired?"

"Because I let someone into the movies one day and it got known."

"Why do you always say 'Be with you in a minute Mr. Peabody!' Gran?" Madison brought the purple sugar bowl in after her.

"Why, don't you remember *Bringing up Baby*? We must have watched it once a month the year you turned 10. 'Be with you in a minute Mr. Peabody!' Cary Grant said it a million times in the first part of the film."

"Oh yeah. That seems so far away. I only associate the expression with you. Up until yesterday I would have had a hard time imagining anyone but you using it."

"Well that's where it comes from sweetie. You want a piece of raspberry cake? I almost forgot to put out the cake." Madison waved it off.

"Some guy said it to me."

"Mm hmm."

"And then I just had this impression that he was so familiar."

"Well it's an expression you only hear in your family."

Madison went silent and Lulu watched her. Now finally, there she was, her Madison, pulling her sweater up around her shoulders

as if she were trying to get warm. This girl who had been so busy running her company, rebuilding her house, getting along with her air-head husband, this busy girl, this busy busy girl.

"Do you hear what you are saying punkin?" She brushed Madison's hair out of her eyes.

"What am I saying?"

"You are saying you are attached to him already."

"What do you mean attached?"

"You know what I mean."

"Pfff."

"Right. So who is this Mr. Peabody?"

"Some sort of journalist at *The Huntsville Times*."

"Where'd you meet him?"

"At *The Huntsville Times*.. Am I repeating myself?"

Lulu went into the kitchen, wiped the humidity off of the pictures of William Daniel and filled up the bright blue electric kettle.

"Tea? Chamomile? Instant coffee? What would you like?"

"Chamomile sounds nice. I've got cramps."

"Now there's somethin' I don't miss with old age. Incapacitating. It was incapacitating for me. What were you doing at *The Huntsville Times*?"

"You know I just can't let go of this thing about the bags in my back yard. Every time I walk out there, I think about it. Who the hell put this stuff in my back yard?"

"Don't fuddle yourself about all that. The Police are workin' on it. They'll figure it out."

"Did you ever hear about the Halloween fire at my house? It was apparently front-page material for *The Huntsville Times*. Burning pumpkins flying out the windows of the house next door, people

screaming, Trick-or-treaters thinking it was some sort of a big show. And then I see the name of an owner in the article, someone who never made it onto the chain of title. This is just strange."

"Who was the owner?" Lulu's hand was trembling as she reached for the teacup.

"Miss Lee Slate. Nowhere on the title search. N'that weird?"

Chapter 66: 1972

A fortress on the water

"Oh my boy, my boy. You are a-sail, a fortress on the great waters."

"A cruise ship, Mama. Get some rest." William Daniel said. The way she had started speaking lately made him vaguely nauseated. It wasn't phony, because she didn't have that in her. It was just, well, too much. He wondered if this was a specific sort of dementia.

"I am not playing with you William Daniel. You have tied your beautiful knots, fastened all the things on and away, away you have gone, my wonderful boy, my lean and beautiful boy. Look at the ships, says the teacher, driven by strong winds, yes, but also by the will of the captain, by the fire in his chest and the power of his tongue."

"You should have written poems Mama."

"And so, you are the poet of your own life. The massive construction, an entire life steered by those strong and small rudders, the will and the tongue. So small a member the tongue, yet it moves the will to great or dangerous things, oh my boy my boy."

He was silent for a long time. He felt ashamed by her rambling poetry this morning.

"I don't know what to say to that." He sat back in the grey vinyl chair that passed for an armchair in this retirement home. "I guess I am not a talker, Mother."

"Yes, you are, you wait and then you talk. This is your strength."

She slept and he sat with her. He thought nothing at all; he simply looked out the window over the tops of the cars in the parking lot, to the boulevard, to the nameless tract homes and the woods

beyond, where the kudzu had created the gates of hell and the straggling lines of prisoners behind. The clock ticked mechanically in the background, and William Daniel nodded off himself. He was jarred awake by his mother's voice.

"The light is on the water. Can you see the light on the water? It's terrifying."

"Pardon me?"

"The light of God is rising from the waters. I'm in trouble. Where's William Daniel? Where is Georgy?"

"I'm here. Georgy is coming this afternoon."

"I'm in trouble and where can I go? The light is on the water."

"I think that's the neon on the ceiling Mama."

"Read to me?"

"Sure. What?"

But she was silent and immobile. And instead of the sadness that he had held in check throughout the previous weeks, he felt relief. And then he felt terrible to feel that relief. Lulu was at home. He wished she were there for a second and then he just wanted to be alone. He put his hand on his mother's cooling shoulder and moved his chair closer to her. To her body, he thought. She was gone.

A nurse popped her head in the door.

"Everything ok Mr. Bell?"

"Yes, she's gone."

Chapter 67: 1947

Prisoners of peace

In March 1947, Emma and Fritz flew to El Paso Texas on a tourist visa, and never went back to Europe.

In the middle of nowhere Texas, at an army base called, ironically, "Fort Bliss", Fritz's uncle was being held as a "Prisoner of Peace," doing nothing for nearly a year. If this was the place where the secret projects were unrolling, they were secret indeed, secret even to the German scientists.

The place was so foreign to Emma and Fritz, the land so dry and strident and dusty, that the German couple was able to recover some equilibrium. They forgot the War years faster than they expected. They rented a small furnished apartment downtown, walking distance from the Mexican border; absolutely nothing reminded them of home. Fritz got a job teaching German to the American officers at Fort Bliss and Emma waited tables the best that she could with her high school English. Their days were busy, their evenings were silent and they organized the present and saved some money.

When news came that the entire team of idle scientists would be transferred to what the Germans called *die Brunnenkresse-Hauptstadt der Welt*, "the watercress capital of the world", — that is to say, to Huntsville Alabama,— Emma and Fritz Lupau were ready. They had saved some more money, sold some family jewelry and were ready to put everything they had into a Wienerschnitzle restaurant. Down here, people called it chicken fried steak and used tough old meat to make it. Emma saw how they cooked in that El Paso diner: she could do much better. The locals preferred beer to wine. But the beer in the USA was bland stuff. Fritz would train their palates. The good old boys were sure to love the real thing.

Chapter 68: 2002

"You will love the real thing."

Linda Petteway was selling her Ukrainian Borscht to a table full of German scientists. One of them had taught at the university of Kyiv. He knew what Linda was talking about, and encouraged the others to try it. This was not the frenchified potage they remembered from their restaurants in Cologne or Bonn.

"But don't spill it on that white shirt. You'll never get the stain out."

Sad specimens of the human condition

Gran Lulu and Madison were sitting a few tables away at Petteway's for their weekly girlfriend lunch. They came here partly because it was the only place in town with no blasting TV. In 2002, just about every restaurant in town either called itself a sports bar and blasted football games to prove it or simply and unpretentiously hung a flat screen TV on the wall and treated the diners to news, commercials and cartoons 24/7.

Petteway's had no television, thank God. It was a quiet and peaceful place although Linda Petteway played a bit too much Cat Stevens for Madison's taste.

Back when it opened in 1972, the competition had been a rather large restaurant on the east side of the square: it was housed in a couple of antique rail cars, and called itself Twickenham Station. This was where the bankers and stockbrokers ate from the salad bar and drank iced tea with fresh mint at noon.

Lulu enjoyed looking from her window seat out across the square towards where Twickenham Station used to be.

"I do miss the salad bars." Gran was playing with the honey in

the pot in front of her.

"The only salad bar I know is pretty horrible stuff. Borderline unsanitary." Madison sipped her tea through a straw.

"It was not horrible: everything was fresh and spotless and set out on shaved ice. It was sort of like being on a cruise ship."

"Except there was no water anywhere."

"…and no one singing *The Shadow of your Smile*." Gran pushed her two emerald rings up her knuckles.

Linda Petteway silently positioned their Cobb Salads on the table. Lulu thought she looked like she was on the point of saying something.

"Yes, Linda dear?" Lulu asked.

"Nothing. Nothing at all." Linda felt flustered. She smiled and reached for something to say that was neutral and especially that was not what she had been thinking about. Her husband came to her mind, her husband who played cards with Lulu's husband once a month for ten years. "Sam said to tell you hello and to remind William Daniel that poker had been moved to our place this month. I'll be at Yoga most of the evening. But it will all be set up."

"Well that's fine. The boys will know what to do I'm sure."

"Dressing on the side for you." Linda put the ramekin down and turned heel. Madison watched her, a little confused.

Lulu did not hesitate to return to her story about how Papa Billy Dan had been conned all those years ago..

"Can you imagine it? Your mamma and papa are so damned rich they can get you into a school where you will be mocked and disrespected for year on end!"

"Jeez Louise." Madison was off taking a ride on Lulu's emotions again

"Well, that was those poor boys. I don't want to say poor boys, because they were rich, and I don't want to say poor boys because they wreaked havoc in our lives."

"Poor sad specimens of the human condition Gran." Gran had the emotion, thought Madison, but *she* had the way of saying it.

"That's it, sad specimens."

"Go on! Can you imagine it?"

"So, there you are at MIT because your Mama paid to refurbish the concert hall and your Daddy gave funds for building some sort of huge piece of scientific equipment."

"And you're a short little guy with a big shock of black hair."

"Only one of them was short, the other was tall and kind of pinheaded. Blond. Balding at 22."

"So what are you gonna do?"

"So what are you gonna do? You're Tweedle Dee at MIT, the only thing to do is stick close to Tweedle Dumb."

"And hide!" Madison chuckled.

"And hide. And try to find some things to feel smart about until you get out of this place."

Gran drummed her bright red nails on the table.

"And the occasion arose." Madison sipped her ice tea without ever looking away from Gran. She'd heard the story before when she was a little kid, but it was one that the family did not repeat very often. It was a story of humiliation in fact. But today, Lulu's tone was a little different, a little lighter.

"And the occasion arose. The occasion arose when Mama Dee and Papa Dumb were able to raise the ante and get their little squirts a little internship at NASA."

"Shit! An internship at NASA? "

"Watch your language young lady. We may not be snobby but we're not shabby either."

"Sorry. But an internship at NASA? Gran, really?"

"In Huntsville, yes ma'am."

"It boggles the mind."

"My mind is as boggled as yours. Well, you know, you have to be fair. They were bright and they knew how to be personable. They could work the phones at NASA." Madison laughed and Lulu thought about it. "Or hell, they could take care of some logistics."

"No, Gran: Logistics at NASA is the heart of the organization. They couldn't do that."

"Maybe not. And they sure weren't going to be scientists."

"But still."

"But still." Gran sat back and reached for her pink leather cigarette case. "Oh shit. I can't smoke here."

"Watch your language Lulu Bell!" Madison snipped. "So what then?"

"Well here's what then. From what I've heard, they got bored. They felt put upon. They were neither charming nor good looking enough to pick up girls during happy hour... And they just felt so stupid they didn't know what to do with themselves."

"They sound like some unhappy unfortunate boys."

Linda approached the table..

"Would you like some more chamomile?"

"Please and thank you, Linda. Well then they heard about Papa Billy Dan."

"What do you mean they heard about Papa Billy Dan?" Madison watched Linda walk away shaking her head and drying her hands.

"Well at that time darlin', everyone in Madison County knew about Papa Billy Dan. And they loved him to death, anyway the working class and the Negroes did."

"African Americans."

"Blacks, Negroes, Africans, Colored, whatever they want to call themselves. I cannot keep track. But they knew him. There was a

Japanese kid too."

Chapter 69: 1972

The tinkling of the bells

The bell tinkled and rang, and, tied to another bell and another one, it kept on tinkling for almost thirty seconds. Wiping her hands in the kitchen, Linda Petteway thought to herself, *That was a cute idea, but I'm going to have to disconnect those bells. It'll drive me and everyone else batty.* She emerged from behind the Moroccan beads to see her first three customers of the day coming into the room untying their sashes: Three blond heads with loose curls, three ladies in their early forties wearing different shades of camel's hair coat. They were looking around the room, and especially the ceiling, as if they were touring the Saint Chappelle in Paris.

"You know what this makes me think of?" said one.

"No, ma'am," said Patricia

"I think I know," chimed in Margaret.

"Oh yes that's it," sang Patricia.

"That gingerbread style house that the hippies almost burnt down!" Meredith was very satisfied with herself.

The three women suddenly realized that Linda was standing there with three menus.

"Oh, excuse us Ma'am! This is just so…"

"Quaint."

"Charming."

"In a modern sort of way. And my goodness! The macramé! I had seen pictures of macramé in Life Magazine but I had not seen it with my own eyes before."

"Thank you very much. Three for lunch?"

"Yes please, excuse us, ma'am, three."

These ladies from the Huntsville Historical Society remarked to her that her vision for Petteway's was quite reminiscent of the Twickenham district. Even if there was something modern and … well, modern about it.

Something walked into the front door that stopped the three Huntsville belles' conversation cold. It was a long-haired Japanese—well, what, young man?— in a Brooks Brothers' suit. He seemed intrigued by the continuing tinkling of the bells.

Chapter 70: 1950

Tamara Spencer

The floorboards of the Ol'Bavaria restaurant rumbled with the passage of a train pulling into Twickenham Station next door. The whistle blew and Tamara covered her ears.

"Sorry, I didn't hear you." William Daniel leaned forward across the bar because he was sitting two stools down from her drinking from a silly beer stein. They were both waiting for a table.

"Political science." Tamara said.

"Political science."

"Aunt Nora would have liked to study politics."

"Yeah, I do remember her mentioning the Suffragettes."

"She *was* a Suffragette. We used to talk about it at the dinner table. She read my textbooks, but she really didn't need to. She knew the Alabama Constitution like the back of her hand."

"Because she cared about it."

"There's not that much science in Political Science, you know. I mean, can you test the hypotheses? Can you re-run the experiments? They should call it *The practice of political and economic philosophies* or something like that."

"That's kind of long." William Daniel yawned, amused.

"Yeah it's long."

Someone had put a nickel in the nickelodeon. Marlene Dietrich sang. *Outside the barracks, beneath the corner light, I always stand and wait for you at night.*

"Why does everyone love that song?" Tamara shook her head. "Haven't we finished with all this German stuff yet?"

"It'll take a long time to be finished with the German stuff Miss Spencer. And it's a German restaurant after all. How *is* your Aunt?"

"She passed last year."

"Oh I ***am*** sorry." The floorboards of the restaurant rumbled again, the whistle blew again, Tamara covered her ears again. "Very sorry Tamara Spencer. She was a damned fine human being. She helped me when I was a boy."

"She passed last year. Seems like a long time ago. Thank you. Is that what you are supposed to say to condolences?"

"Don't ask me. I've never been very good at protocol. Sounds right."

They drank their beer and listened to the click, whattle, flip and scratch of the record in the jukebox. *Want to buy some illusions? Slightly used, Second hand.*

"My goodness. Kind of cynical." Tamara felt the need to change the conversation, and then was embarrassed to have said that particular thing. Apparently, he could tell.

"It's a song. Someone trying to show he knows how the world works. How y'all getting along in Huntsville? This place is kind of wild for a young girl."

"She left me her house. Not alone. Got my baby brother in the army."

"Does he live with you?"

"No. He's in Texas right now. Fort Bliss. There's a name that thumbs its nose at you, doesn't it?"

William Daniel chuckled. He had finished his beer in its silly stein and pushed it towards the bartender. Tamara looked down at her drink and then up again.

"Anyway, I'm not alone. I have friends. Like you, right?"

"Right." He was surprised to hear that. "Do you live alone in your aunt's house?"

"Yeah."

"Miss Spencer get a dog and a roommate. A young girl should not be living alone in a house in this town. Or prob'ly in any town." For some reason, the image of McPherson's ogling her crossed William Daniel's mind.

"A dog maybe. A roommate, not."

The hostess came to seat William Daniel. He turned to Tamara.

"Would you like to join me?"

"Well."

"I mean, if you are not waiting for someone."

"Ah. No. Yes. I mean thank you. Yes. Please. When can I stop saying these words?"

The waitress seemed confused, and the two of them laughed and followed her to the table.

Chapter 71: 2011

The Arab Spring

It was that day. The day the Egyptians decided to be free.

Everyone in Madison's office, and in fact, everyone in her entourage was thrilled about the Arab Spring. The TV was blasting. Hearts raced in the lunchroom to watch people mass in the Cairo night, under the streetlamps, pouring in by the tens of thousands onto Tahrir Square as the police backed off. Madison was shaken.

"I don't know about mass emotion, Trish. It doesn't always lead to good things." She cringed to hear the patronizing edge in her voice. Trish was her assistant, and a damned good one.

"This is a new world." Trish held out to her a plate of fresh strawberries."

"Ok. Well. Hm." She took one. "We will see."

Madison let the argument go, popped the strawberry in her mouth, poured her coffee and went back to her office.

"The liberation of nations. What do you think of that Madison? Throwing off the dictators. Think that'll work out better than Iraq?" It was Lulu on the phone.

"Gran, would you just answer my question?" She tapped her fingernails on her polished teak desk.

"What was your question again?"

"Didn't Papa Billy Dan know the Slates?

An explosion on Tahrir square made people in the lunchroom break into loud speculation.

"Lordy me, what was that?" Lulu might have been responding to the explosion or she might have been responding to the question. Madison couldn't tell for sure.

"The Slates. The Slates who owned the house next door to mine."

"Slate is a common name in this area honey. Which Slate are you talking about? Maybe you mean the Slades. But then, what do you mean they owned your house? I don't think the Slades ever owned your house."

"My house and the one next door. The one that caught fire on Halloween night. Mrs. Lee Slate. Then they bought my house and sold it to a partnership who sold it to someone who sold it to us."

"You are complicated Madison!"

"Did you know her? Is she the one who owned my house?"

"Owned it? No no no. Nellie Maude Slade, she's my cousin you know, never owned anything. Never had any money. We kept her off the streets." The pause in the conversation barely had time to exist. "The Arab Spring. What a beautiful name for what a big mess. Almost sounds like a poet wrote the poem before the kids started hitting the streets."

"She's your cousin? So, you know she lived there?" Madison was running her fingers along the edge of her desk.

"It was a thousand years ago you know? Papa Billy Dan and his mom rented that old place in the woods from a guy and his daughter. Grant and his daughter Gillian Slade. Gillian was my aunt sort of. Great Uncle Grant died in the great black death. And Aunty G, she was a pale skinny thing like a plant that barely stays alive. Finally managed to get married though. Her daughter is Nellie Maude. Papa Billy Dan made sure she always had a roof over her head. She died a few years back."

"Nellie Maude died? "

"Nooo. Gillian Slade died."

"These were your cousins?" For the first time in her life, Madison felt searing anger at Lulu. Still, she didn't understand why. And she certainly couldn't bring herself to say so. Lulu probably could hear it in Madison's voice, but apparently she chose to ignore it.

"Everyone's cousins in Huntspatch dear. Unless they're from out of state." Lulu tapped her fingernails on the receiver. "Do I really need to tell you that?"

Chapter 72: 1972

When Trent and Philip walked into Petteway's that afternoon, they had to duck their heads because Linda had added three new fuchsia plants and four new macramé sculptures, all of this suspended from the ceiling. The smell of patchouli oil and incense overpowered the aromas from the kitchen. Carole King was singing in the background.

"Someone's going to sue you, woman," Philip said.

"For what?" Trent looked at him.

"That's how you say hello?" Linda shot back, setting glasses of minted iced tea in front of two stockbrokers seated at the window.

"What do you mean for what? For the concussion I get from these plants. For the fact that I fall down and break my leg because I can't see where I'm going in here."

"Right," Trent said.

"For the weirdness of the food. What's that hairy stuff?" he said pointing to the cucumber sandwich Linda was carrying to table.

"Bean sprouts. Get out of my way Hawkes."

In spite of the strangeness of her menu, the oddness of the macramé works and the numberless hanging plants, the clientele flocked in. A year earlier, stockbrokers and bankers had waited outside Twickenham Station for steaks and Reuben sandwiches at lunchtime. Now they stood in line for Petteway's vegetarian menu. Linda hired a waiter.

"So, what are we going to do for Halloween, vegetarian girl?" Philip Hawkes asked very loud. "Throw some Jack-o-Lanterns out of the window? Burn down some buildings?"

"Nothing," Linda said scooting by him to the kitchen.

"Nothing?" Philip whined like a little boy, thinking this was funny.

"Oh, come on, would you shut up?" Trent smacked him on the shoulder.

Something inside has died and I can't hide and I just can't fake it.

Linda again weaved through the people carrying multiple plates, and served the dark young man with the long hair last.

"Is that Matt Hoshi?" Philip was straining his neck to see the guy's profile.

"I don't have any idea," Linda snapped. "Quit gawking at my customers."

"How bout we take you to dinner this year?" Trent chirped as she went by.

"You sound like a damned girl, Trent. *Ooh it's too late baby now it's too late*." Philip held a salt shaker to his mouth and sang in a falsetto with Carole King.

"How about you guys shut up and go away. Get a Sarah Lee chocolate cake and some candy corn and I'll see you at my place at 8pm. If I'm still working, you go upstairs and wait for me quietly like good boys. We'll see what we have in the fridge for the rest. I think I have some leftover roast."

"Now that's the kind of vegetarian I like," said Philip. "Then we can all go trick or treating."

"Get out of here. See you at 8."

"How continental!" Philip said.

"Scat. Get out."

Chapter 73: 1951

After the ceremony

Nineteen-year-old Tim Spencer was dressed in full military regalia, with his white gloved hand poised on his older sister's as he led her up the aisle. She shifted and placed her hand on top of his. Tamara whispered to him, "Don't be nervous Timmy." When they stopped in front of the altar, she kissed her brother and said "The worst is over. five more minutes of standing here and you're done." She looked over at William Daniel all decked out in his grey morning suit and burst into a huge senseless smile. She had known him for seven years and he still had that effect on her.

There were not that many people in the Church: William Daniel's mama, Maryse Bell was there of course. Georgy's wife Sherry, Mr. Hunt and some employees of HH Industries including Bert Jefferson and his family, the only African Americans in the group. Hubert Mead had made it down from Nashville to be one of Bell's witnesses, and George Bell was standing at his brother's side. On her side of the aisle, Tamara had two cousins for bridesmaids, two friends, her great Aunt Daisy and old Mayor Coleman of Anniston Alabama. Both of her parents had died years ago, and so had her guardian Aunt Nora Spencer. Old Jacob Pierce, founder of *The Huntsville Times* was covering the wedding as a personal favor to Mayor Coleman, and the Times photographer was taking the pics.

After the ceremony, they all piled into cars and trucks and headed off to Ol' Bavaria for champagne, beer and Wienerschnitzle. This was not because it the best restaurant in town, and not because it was the best price-quality ratio in town (though William Daniel had calculated that it was pretty darned good) but because the German owners were the only ones in town who would not refuse the Jeffersons a seat at the table.

This subject, the fact that Bert and Shirleen and little Leola Jefferson could be seated at the table with them, had crept into the conversation on the wings of a tactless angel. William Daniel, Mr. Hunt, Tamara and Jacob Pierce had all tried to shoo it away by talking about Alabama politics instead. It was decided that Alabamans had not resigned themselves to the fact that they had lost the Civil War. To prove their contempt for mainstream American politics, Bama natives had built and protected an alternative political world based on contacts with powerful people in B'ham, local mini-mafias as well as the Kiwanis Club, the Scottish Rites and the Freemasons (and including, of course the KKK, although those at table restrained themselves from mentioning the unmentionable) and just a dash of corruption.

"Everyone in Alabama claims to know the Governor," said Tamara Spencer Bell. "Or else the owner of the Dodge Concession in Huntsville."

"Or else a couple of the guys at Fitzsimmons's." William Daniel continued her thought. "You need two Fitzsimmons Brothers regulars in the place of the Governor or the owner of the Dodge Concession these days," he said. "Although in the old days, one Fitzsimmons would largely do the job."

"See, that's why I married him," Tamara grinned.

As they sat around the table, Tamara was uncomfortable in her huge dress. Even if her friends and husband gave her wide berth, there was no way to sit normally and talk to people in this thing. She suddenly spoke up:

"Darlene, could you come with me to the powder room?"

It was very delicate moving out from her spot in this huge white regalia without dumping beers all over the table, but she made it with a little help from her friends. When she came back, it almost looked like she had changed dresses: she was now lithe and tall and the veils and petticoats were scurrying out of the restaurant on Darlene's legs. Leola Jefferson laughed and held onto her Mama's arm.

"That's better. Now we can have a normal conversation. What are we talking about?"

"This Negro in Oklahoma," Georgy volunteered.

"What Negro in Oklahoma?" Tamara wanted to know.

"The one't wanted to stop segregation at school." Bert Jefferson answered.

"I'm sorry, I don't know *what* y'all are talkin' about." Tamara tucked a napkin into the round neckline of her wedding dress.

"McLaughlin," someone said from the other end of the table.

"McLaurin." Hubert Mead corrected

"It's a Supreme Court case dear." William Daniel said it as he edged out of his morning coat.

"Oh yeah, you get to call me dear now!" Tamara smiled a silly smile and helped him pull off the formal attire.

Darlene slipped into the last available chair and whined. "Let's not talk politics!"

"She always talks politics." William Daniel patted Tamara on the knee.

"No use trying to stop her." Her brother Timmy said.

"*As citizens, they will carefully read the newspapers, enter into every political disquisition, freely blame or censure governors and others*." Maryse's eyes brightened as she said it.

William Daniel saw that Tamara did not understand that his mother was quoting her ancestor.

"She means you're a good citizen to talk politics."

"So, what about this Supreme Court case dear?"

Over Alsatian wine and beers and Wienerschnitzle and black forest cake, the long table drew out their sentences, echoed each other, slapped the table and laughed out loud. Hubert Mead frequently corrected the minutest details, Bert Jefferson corrected

their interpretations of the Black man's experience, Maryse Bell reformulated what other people were saying in the words of her ancestor, little Leola Jefferson fell asleep with whipped cream on her upper lip and Tamara kept asking good questions.

"Umm, so he was saying that education is not only about being in a room and listening to the teacher or sitting in the library reading a book?" She asked.

"Yup. That was the argument anyway." William Daniel suddenly felt happier than he had ever been, and as he spoke, he was conscious of how damned blessed he felt. "It's about all the conversations you have with people, all the ideas you listen to all around you. And because you're supposed to become part of a profession, it is also about the contacts you make, and the relationships you develop, and the small talk and social protocol you learn how to manage."

"Small talk." Hubert grumbled. "*Ruin, trouble and woe to all who don't know how to do it.*"

"Give it a break Hubert." Tamara smiled at him and shook her head.

"He's right. If you don't learn how *to varnish nonsense with the charms of sound* as someone once said, you never are going to get along." Jacob Pierce said.

"You got to learn the private language of your profession, too," Bert said.

"And the social do's and don'ts," Shirleen agreed.

"So, if y'all are isolated…" William Daniel raised his hand to catch the waiter's attention, but he didn't appear to see them. "Well, t's not gonna work... So old McLaurin's right to fair treatment before the law was being violated. Like Shirleen said, there's no separate but equal. That's the whole idea I think."

"Well, Mr. Bell," said Bert, "I do not see, even if he wins this"

"he won it Mr. Jefferson."

"Yeah, well, I do not see a bunch of Oklahoma boys spending their time talkin' to a Negro and joining him for lunch."

"Well, but that's not the role of the court. The role of the court is to make sure there is no legal basis for excluding him from commerce with other men." Jacob Pierce said.

"and women," said Tamara

"Huh?" Timmy and Jacob said.

"and women," repeated Darlene, Sherry and Shirleen at the same time.

"Ok and women. But I'm not sure it would be the same thing with women." Jacob was a little disconcerted by the idea.

"I think they mean something different," Hubert Mead said, scratching his head and looking at no one in particular. "Like, there should be no legal basis for excluding anyone, man or woman, from commerce with anyone else, man or woman."

"No, I don't mean something different. I'm just a little tired of hearing the entire human race referred to as 'men'," Tamara said.

The entire room went quiet for a minute as the idea soaked in. Old Aunt Daisy shifted her weight, adjusted the little blue veil pinned into her white hair and broke the silence.

"Well now, if we are thinking about equality between the sexes, Tamara dear, it seems to me we have better things to do than to waste our time quibbling about words."

The women around the table turned a bit thoughtful and the men seemed uncomfortable.

It took a full minute for William Daniel to break the ice.

"Who would like a little more champagne?" He signaled to the waiter to fill the glasses.

"Don't you agree with me dear?" Tamara asked him quietly.

"Well, probably. But we'll have to give this some thought."

She leaned into him, happy again. He had said ‘we’.

“Anyway, the state can’t force people to talk to each other,” He continued. “And by the way, the Supreme Court did not even rule that the University of Oklahoma had to do anything specific. They just said this case of segregation is unconstitutional. Up to the state to enforce the ruling however they see fit.”

“I bet that George McLaurin was angry,” Hubert said.

“Bet he was.” William Daniel said.

“Bet he still is,” Bert Jefferson said.

Chapter 74: 2011 HPD

I don't know about that woman

Gran Lulu and Madison introduced themselves to the sergeant at the desk and Lulu with her cane hobbled back towards the institutional armchair with the stuffing pushing out through the cracked grey vinyl. Madison was still saying something to the officer.

"Would you just lay my raincoat across the seat of the chair Madison? I am afraid of catching my skirt on the sharp bits here."

"Sure Gran." Madison tapped her business card on the counter and left it there and then headed back to Lulu.

They both sat and looked up at the enormous TV bolted to the wall.

"I don't know about that woman ," said Gran. "I don't trust her."

Clinton doubled down on her harsh statements about Syria's Assad today: "If anyone, including President Assad, thinks that the United States is secretly hoping that the regime will emerge from this turmoil to continue its brutality and repression, they are wrong."

"It's not that I don't trust her like I think she's ee-vil..."

In an interview with the Wall Street Journal in March, Mr. Assad had stated, and I quote, that "Protests in Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen are ushering in a 'new era' in the Middle East, and that Arab rulers will need to do more to accommodate their people's rising political and economic aspirations." And for a while, we thought she believed him.

"I don't trust her like I think she has got her head stuck in the sand. That's a very dangerous thing. A very dangerous thing. I mean, she's whip smart. Yeah. But she believed that lying husband of hers when he was playing with that poor little twenty-three-year-

old girl. My God what a bald-faced liar that boy was and how love will make a girl a fool."

"Maybe that was a calculated 'belief' in him, Gran."

Sergeant Bertine Kobehi came out to fetch Lulu.

"Well Bertine! Your grandma and I just had tea together a week ago!"

"You did?"

A split second behind Bertine, Madison was saying the same thing.

"You did?"

"Well we older ladies do have lives, don't we? She came over with a couple of other girls."

Bertine just smiled and nodded and held out her elbow for Mrs. Bell to hold onto.

"Come this way Mrs. Bell."

"I'll come with her." Madison picked up her bag and her coat to follow.

"I'm afraid," Bertine didn't have the time to finish her sentence.

"Of course, she'll come with me. You're always invited dear"

"Chief?"

"Mrs. Bell-Garth, it would be better if we spoke alone. It's a friendly discussion, just a quick couple of questions, not a formal interview. We will take good care of her."

Chief Manville steered Lulu away from the interview room and sat her down in his office at his work-table. Detective Penn and Sergeant Kobehi followed in behind.

"Thanks for taking the time to help us think about this case, Mrs. Bell." The chief smiled at her.

"Why you're welcome sir."

“Would you like a cup of tea or coffee?”

“No thank you.”

“Ok, well, let’s think about some things together, what do you say?”

“Of course. Let’s do that.”

“Why do you think we wanted to speak with you: do you have any idea?”

“I must imagine that you are wondering where the money in Madison's garden came from."

"Mm hmm... and?"

"And you are wondering about Mr. Bell, my late husband, who had quite a bit of cash stolen from him and that money disappeared.”

“Stolen?”

“Well, he was conned out of it, that’s the same thing isn’t it?”

“Not to the law, Mrs. Bell,” Manville said.

“Well, anyway, now large amounts of money are showing up in our Madison’s back yard.”

“That’s pretty much it. Do you think there is a connection between the two sums of money?”

“Well, there certainly could be. But what a very strange coincidence that that money should lie untouched for 40 years in that house.”

“Mm hmm.”

“.. owned by other people. … and that our granddaughter would later buy it. And have no idea it was there.”

“Yep. That certainly is strange. If you were the investigator on this project, how do you think you would proceed?”

“Well I would want to find out whether that this pile of cash and that were the same ones.”

“Well that’s one of the things we are working on. But we’re not doing technical analyses for now.”

"Why would that be?" Lulu looked at the clock.

"No budget for cold financial cases. The statute of limitations on larceny, you know what that is?"

"Yes, I do sir."

"So, if it's just stolen money, time is up. And if it is the con you are talking about, time is not up. But there's none of that TV show magic to be performed either: the two young men have already been tried for that crime and won't be tried again. Detective Penn, in what little spare time he has, is doing his best without the magic."

"Mm. Hmm."

"When did Maryse Bell die?" Captain Manville asked.

"I beg your pardon?" Lulu was surprised by the transition.

"Mr. Bell's Mama. When did she die?"

"Mama Bell. She died in 1972. The year of all the dramas. Her death started it, the same week as Papa Billy Dan's friend up there in Nashville died. What was his name? I'm slippin' you know."

"Would it be Mr. Mead?"

"Yes, Hubert. The only Hubert I ever knew who wanted to be called Hubert."

"What do you mean, the year of all the dramas?"

"Well it was wasn't it? It was the year those silly boys took our money."

"A little bit of your money" Bertine corrected. Penn tapped his pencil on the table in front of her. She was there to observe and keep her mouth shut.

"Well our money Bertine. A significant amount. A difficult amount for William Daniel."

"Did anyone make an insurance claim on this loss? We have found no records," Penn asked.

"No. William Daniel didn't insure his gold or his cold cash."

"So, it was a pure loss," Manville said

"Complete loss, yes. Why did you ask when Maryse Bell died? You certainly have records on that sort of thing."

"Well, Mrs. Bell, I was frankly just checking to see that your memory is functioning well."

"Yeah well, the old stuff is no problem. It's what happened this morning, where I put the keys that's the problem."

Manville leaned back in his comfortable desk chair and watched the old lady.

"Mr. Bell must have been terribly upset at that time, not very good at managing things," the chief observed.

"Pardon me? Not good at managing things? Noo. Terribly upset, of course. Terribly. Went silent. But managing things was no problem. He managed the hell out of things all his life, and when times were bad, he went into hyper-management mode. I had to sit him down and make him breathe."

"Mr. Mead was a great friend."

"Well, a very good friend. William Daniel was a private man. The only great friends he had were Madison's grandmother Tamara Spencer, and then me. But a good friend, yes."

"How did they meet? Mr. Mead was younger than your husband."

"Yes, 10 years younger. He died a young man."

"They didn't meet at school."

"No. Not at school. William Daniel didn't go to school. Hubert worked for William Daniel at the factory after the war."

"So Mr. Bell was friendly with his staff."

"Friendly with a proper distance. He was a good boss and a kind man. But he wasn't friends with people. Young Hubert was sort of a special case. He was talented but he was kind of weird and was

very intimidated by people."

"A geeky guy?"

"Yeah kind of geeky. In the 40's People were stupid with you if you were that sort."

"And people were stupid with Herbert," Manville said.

"Hubert. Yes, they were."

"Do you think he could have wanted to get even with Mr. Bell because the staff was unpleasant with him?" Detective Penn took over the interview.

"Lord no. He died before all this happened. Anyway, William Daniel defended him, was very, I would say, firm. He wouldn't stand for anyone being humiliated for any reason. Fired someone. Made Hubert director of R & D. And that was that. They started fishing together at about that time I think."

"Do you know who he fired?"

"No I don't."

"Do you know what happened to him?" Penn was taking notes

"William Daniel?"

"Hubert"

"A heart attack I think."

"Mmm hm. No I mean, where did he go afterwards?" Penn noted *"heart attack"* on his pad.

"Went back to school on the GI Bill. It was the fifties. Got a PhD and taught at Vanderbilt."

"Apparently the boys who scammed your husband grew up in Nashville. Did you hear that?" Manville intervened.

"Lot of people grew up in Nashville. What does all this have to do with the price of beans captain?"

"Well, we are still just trying to figure out how that money might have ended up in Mrs. Bell-Garth's back yard, with your help,"

Detective Penn said looking directly at Lulu.

"You mean I helped her put it there?" Lulu asked.

"Sorry, with your help, we want to figure out how it ended up there."

"I still don't get the connection. You are making me dizzy."

"Well, we were wondering if Mr. Bell knew the fathers of Mr. Benson or Mr. Hawkes."

"Not before the lawsuit and you can bet, not after."

"The lawsuit?"

"Mr. Hawkes' lawyer helped someone sue us about some land William Daniel had acquired a very long time ago, and had since sold to the Federal Government."

"And so he didn't speak to the Bensons and the Hawkes because…?"

"Because they slandered him."

"Slandered?"

"Accused him of stealing that land. Read the damned transcripts of the trial if you want to know. But, statute of limitations as you say, that lawsuit never got very far. It just damaged William Daniel's reputation. And that was the point, embarrass us to keep those rich boys out of prison. That rich boy." Lulu was red in the face with anger.

"Just think of this as a chat. You sure you wouldn't like some tea or water?" Eugene asked.

"No, I'm just fine. I am just thinking about, after they took his money, after he was sued, how humiliation rose in William Daniel's soul, like some sort of a silent plague. A thing that came to get him, to make him sick and isolate him from everyone he knew. Even from me. It was a few years before he returned to his old self."

Manville and Penn glanced up at each other again. They both knew this was the sort of emotion that could lead to crimes. They wanted to press this, to understand why Mr. Bell, or better in

what way Mr. Bell could be so deeply damaged by humiliation. Although they didn't know him personally, he still was known in Huntsville as an extremely successful man, with a reputation for being kind, a little secretive and very cool-headed. Their years of experience had shown them that what Lulu Bell spoke about was the sort of passionate meltdown that brought out the very worst in human beings. And yet, there was apparently no murder. Just rather a lot of money in the wrong place.

Bertine was thinking something else: she noticed Lulu's hands were trembling..

"You sure you're ok Mrs. Bell? Can I get you something?"

"Don't worry about me Maddie, I like talkin with people." She shook the nerves out of her shoulders and looked away.

Eugene again registered the strangeness of her remark: Mrs. Bell-Garth was not in the room. He made a note and continued.

"Mrs. Bell, during the first 15 years of your life did you ever steal anything?"

"Now I don't believe I did. That was a very long time ago of course, and there are many things I don't remember about my childhood. But I did sneak a boy into the Lyric Theater one night, with dire consequences for my Mother and me."

"How so?"

"She got fired and we almost ended up living on the street."

The detective remained quiet for several seconds.

"Mrs. Bell, have you got a copy of your appointment books from 1971 and 1972?" Detective Penn picked up.

"I suppose I might have. I'd have to dig for it."

"Can I come on over and give you a hand with that search?"

"Sure, why not?"

"Good grief Eugene, you can't do that." Bertine spoke up. "De-

tective Penn, excuse me, but…"

"Now, if Mrs. Bell says I can come by her house and help her look for her appointment book, who is to say I can't, right Mrs. Bell?"

"Right Detective."

Chapter 75: 1972

The American Dream

Dinners at Linda's house were simple now: a roast in the oven, baked potatoes, a Sarah Lee store-bought pumpkin pie or chocolate cake. The end. She had started asking them to bring desserts because frankly, why should she pay for everything?

This strict, motherly attitude suited Philip fairly well. He was not tempted to ridicule and provoke if he was given no leeway.

"Look at this! An article in this magazine, what's this magazine? *Southern Living*? That guy your old apartment manager was talking about. William Daniel Bell. Up from nothing. Dirt poor. Defense contracts. Pearl grey carpets. Turquoise swimming pool. Wife with emeralds on her fingers and toes. "No one thinks this sort of everyday American Dream exists, but we all know it does." Crappy writer. Crappy stuff. Don't they have an editor over there? What's her name? Joanne Tanner?" He tossed the magazine on the floor.

"Pick it up Philip." Linda commanded and he complied.

"Gimme the American Dream guys. I'm workin on it. Pass me the Wall Street Journal."

Philip didn't care about how much he disliked Linda right now. For the past few months after dinner he had been obsessed with figuring out how to make some big money out of the birthday check his Daddy had mailed him. Two thousand three hundred U.S. dollars. One hundred for every year of his life, as usual. He used to play the horses or the lottery with it, but this year he thought he would start building his personal fortune. He read the Wall Street Journal and when he could get hold of it, the Financial Times. Trent would sit and watch football games on TV and carry on distracted conversations with Philip. Linda would clean up.

One evening, Hawkes fairly exploded with enthusiasm over his newspaper.

"Look at this guy! Now here's a real American Dream! Richest man in America! Oohoo! The American dream! Left home at sixteen and got a job as a dishwasher. Dream it H.L.!! A mule-team driver, woohoo! Dream on young boy! A logger, a farmhand, and a construction worker, before finally finding his calling – wait for it boys! Wait for it! Poker!"

"Isn't that the guy who's been saying that everybody with savings and financial investments has been losing money since 1971?" Trent flipped on the TV to watch some football.

"Yep, he's the prophet of doom for foolish investors," Philip said. "Inflation will eat up all your profits and more if you don't choose the right investment instrument."

Very soon, Linda said to herself, very soon she would stop allowing them to invite themselves to dinner.

"Feet off the couch Philip! Use a coaster for crying out loud Trent!"

"That's the guy," Philip fairly sang the words, swinging his feet back to the floor.

"He didn't make all his fricken money on poker." Trent slid the coaster back under his beer.

"Well, he won one oilfield and then another in a high stakes game from what I can tell. I guess that's making all your money from poker my boy."

"He's got a couple of sons who have been playing the commodities market with silver I hear." Trent drained his glass.

"Does he?" Philip came wild alive.

Now Trent was not at all excited by this story. He was, like a cat or a dog, content to be doing the things he had always done. Right now, his habit was following the commodities market in a very loose and distracted way. It was Philip who honed in and focused from time to time.

Trent was desireless. Had he thought about it, which he had not, he might have recognized that over the years he had grown dependent on the stimulation of his excitable friend.

At the same time, he took satisfaction in bringing Philip, who was always flipping out, back to earth. No one else, he might have remarked had he remarked such things, was capable of both playing the game with him and reining his fantasies in. Linda had become Trent's help-mate in this, he would have observed had he observed anything at all, because she insisted on a certain material discipline.

At the same time, he would have been wrong to think Linda was happy to play her role. In fact, Linda was ready to let go of the two of them. The question was when and how.

"Well have a look at this! Have a gander! Value of gold has gone up 20% in the past 12 months and it's going up faster now."

Philip was sprawled across the green velvet couch in Linda's small living room.

"Where did she go?" he asked Trent.

"She's going to be up in a few minutes. She went down to finish the kitchen clean up."

"Why doesn't she get a bigger place? This place is too small for us."

Linda opened the door at that point.

"What do you mean 'us'? Get your damned feet off my couch Hawkes."

"Well, you know what he means, we always hang out." Trent said. "But he's kind of self-centered."

"Yeah, well, Philip, I've got some shocking news for you. We are not getting married. I'm terribly sorry. Maybe you should move on and stop wasting your time with someone like me."

"How does she do it? She doesn't even get any sex from us and she's breaking our hearts."

"Oh shut up Philip," Trent said, looking at Linda.

"Look, here's the thing. That guy has more available funds for investing." Philip was looking out to the windows of the police station across the street.

"Transition?" Trent said.

"Narcissists don't do transitions," Linda said.

"Guy's got a lot of gold, babies!"

"What guy?" Trent asked. "Oh, you mean William Daniel Bell. Can you stop with this Hawkes? You're making me feel like I'm in on something I don't want to be in on."

"He wants to keep investing. Price of gold will go up 30% before the end of the year. Bet Bell's not gonna be buying gold right now. No not gold. So, what'll it be babies? What'll it be Trent? What'll it be whatshername?"

The answer was silver. Everyone following their nose was going to buy silver instead of gold, the gold bubble was going to burst. But two thousand three hundred dollars was not enough of an investment to make any real money on the coming surge in the silver market. And if the gold bubble burst too quickly, he could go bust.

Philip's mind went back to that nutcracker, the one with the magic door, one thing goes in, and another thing comes out the other side.

The next Saturday, he went to do some research on magic tricks at the university library. He found this weird old book called "The Boy Mechanic." It taught little boys how to create a small box that would make pencils disappear. It was made out of a cereal box.

"What's with him?" Linda asked the next time they invited themselves to dinner.

"Oh, he's decided to build some sort of magic box."

"Silence is nice," she said

"Silence is nice," Trent echoed.

From then on, Philip Hawkes was like a quiet careful kid alone in his corner working on projects.

Chapter 76: 1953

Fitzsimmons Brothers

At 7 p.m., Fitzsimmons Brothers Haberdashery still had the lights on. Mrs. Charles Fitzsimmons cleared off the sale table. She regretted that Lettie Mae had taken ill this morning and that she would have to do everything herself. Is this what a degree in art history from Vanderbilt University had prepared her for?

But Charles had said to her this morning, *Patricia*, he had said it almost triumphantly, *Patricia, it is just as well, because these meetings are confidential.*

She took the folded damask tablecloth, flicked her wrists and watched the beautiful sail float open across the table. From her picnic basket she brought out little plates and bowls and silverware and folded damask napkins. She positioned quinces, pears and lemons in her antique white compotier. "Looks like a little Zurbaran," she said out loud. On the menu: shrimp cocktail, egg salad sandwiches, pimento roll, potato chips -- and of course peach pie and minted ice tea. The distinguished members of Huntsville's Chamber of Commerce and their guests would nibble all evening, just like a room full of little boys.

Charles and his brother Henry Fitzsimmons, Dr. Calhoun and Mr. Sparrow were already behind the cash desk right now talking about something. They were waiting for the arrival of the illustrious Milton Cummings and Senator John Sparkman.

Words emerged from their whispering and sudden bursts of laughter, words that seemed lovely and rhythmic to Patricia, but that meant nothing. "That wu-uhd be ironic…" It was Dr. Calhoun's voice. Time to take the pimento roll out of the refrigerator in the back room and slice it.

"The magic of seniority in the Democratic Pahdi, gentlemen!..."

She wanted those slices to be bright and perfect. The packer's desk back there had still not been cleared off from the workday.

"'Somber muttering of tragedy', he wrote, can you believe it?"

And it was covered with tissue paper, bits of twine and tape stuck to the edges.

"'Somber mutterings' I believe it was."

More work for her. Why couldn't Mr. Winsome do his job properly?

"…alliances with those foreigners."

"What foreigners Charles?"

"Why those foreigners on the Potomac."

The other three men behind the counter leaned back against the wall and laughed out loud. The new owner of the Dodge Dealership walked into the middle of this conversation. He was a strapping young man and was not shy about asking questions to his elders.

"What are y'all laughin' about?"

"Politics, Scotty, just politics. Well now Charles, you must be reasonable. How do you expect us to obtain the tax and credit assistance for small businesses in the Great State of Alabama if we make no compromise with the North?"

They were going to be here until the middle of the night tonight. Tonight, on the agenda was the second invasion of the Germans, Mrs. Fitzsimmons expected. They had been in town since 1950. But would they finally get their hands on the Redstone Arsenal?

"Apparently SOLD on the idea!"

These words popped out of Henry's mouth so loud, that she wondered what they were talking about. One of the Germans had a family that was negotiating a life in town, where they had opened a German restaurant, Ol' Bavaria across the square, next to the train station.

"I was of the impression, sir, that an Alabama Senator was rather like the Ambassador of the Governor to that illustrious northern city," Scotty said.

"No Scotty. Although I can see where you might get that impression, listening to Ol' Big Jim," Charles responded.

Mrs. Fitzsimmons felt this was not a particularly genteel way to speak of the Governor. He had kindly joined her and her Huntsville Historical Society members a few years back for the erection of their first historical marker to the unsung heroes of the Confederacy. She arranged the last dainty sandwich on the pretty plate she had brought for the occasion and brought it to the buffet.

"Y'all can have a little sandwich if you want one. I'm bringing in the ice tea and the other things anon."

"The Senator represents all of the Great State of Alabama, and his conscience." Charles always had the beau mot, thought Mrs. Fitzsimmons. But she would have to ask him just what he meant by that.

Mrs. Fitzsimmons went back into the store room, arranged her tray of tall glasses, sugar bowl and tongs, long silver tea spoons and ice tea with mint sprigs. It occurred to her she should have brought that out first because it was a warm evening. As she was coming back into the room, the men started whispering again, and a few words wafted past her.

"Gallant favors so it seems."

“It is time for ice tea gentlemen, this evening is suffocating don’t you think?” she rang like a bell when she spoke.

But they did not respond, they continued their conversation as they sidled over to the buffet table.

“Government contracts they said. Do you believe that?” Scotty was spreading the news.

“Why of course I believe it!” Henry popped a deviled egg in his mouth and licked his fingers.

Mrs Fitzsimmons took an egg salad sandwich in two fingers and headed back to the store-room. That German restaurant even allowed Negros into the dining room she had heard. She did not patronize that establishment herself. So why oh why was everyone talking about moving those krauts ***permanently*** into Huntsville, into a military facility no less? Well, this was Huntsville, and things like this did not happen without the approval of the core team of businessmen, local politicians and surviving members of the richest families in the Southeast.

She could rest assured everything would be all right, Charles had said.

Chapter 77: 2011

4:02

He was asleep. Madison's telephone said it was 4:02 in the morning. How did she end up in bed with him? Well, she knew how she ended up in bed with him. Just look at that face, that grey and brown tousle of hair, the structure of that massive body thrown across the bed.

Oh shit. But how did she get to the point where she would get to the point of ending up in bed with him? *Oh my God*, she thought, *my brains are turning to scrambled eggs*.

The situation was delicate. She was married. *Oh my God*, she remembered. *I'm married.*

She needed to spare herself. Not be sentimental. Slip out from under the wonderful arm which he had thrown over her, slide off the bed, grab her undies and her silk slip and her black wool dress and her high heels and tiptoe, I mean tiptoe into the bathroom, take the quietest pee of her life, grab her coat and bag and be gone out that door without allowing it to creak. She'd check her hair and makeup in the elevator.

She was the one who was supposed to wake up and find him

gone. This time it would be the guy. He probably wouldn't even register her departure. She had thought it through, imagined the moves. She took a deep breath and started the action series.

"Hey, where you goin'?" his sleepy voice was so relaxed it almost broke her heart.

"Gotta go. So sorry. Gotta go home."

"Mm. Where's home?"

"Home. To my husband. Sorry. Really. I'm gone."

"I thought he was in LA this week."

"Did I say that? Well."

"Husband. Yeah. Ok. I'm sorry. Mad." He was looking at her.

"Maddie."

"I am not calling you Maddie."

"Madison. Jake…"

"Jake Pierce. Madison Bell. Jake Pierce."

"Madison Bell-Garth."

"Of Bell-Garth Woolson I presume."

"Yeah."

"I'll drop by."

"It's not such a good idea. I'm sorry."

"I'll probably drop by anyway."

She didn't have time to argue with him. And she wanted him to drop by even if it was a bad idea.

"Oh my God. This is a mess," she said as she turned on the ignition. "This is a mess God. Get me out of this, please."

Chapter 78: 1972

Filth accrues

Linda sometimes snapped at Philip and Trent that they had decided to move in with her. But in fact, the young men shared a rather empty and impersonal two-bedroom apartment near the Arsenal where the dishes weren't washed and the sink backed up. All through their childhood some not very present mother had done the decorating or rather arranged to have it done and some person of color had made their worlds run like a charm, and today, five years after moving out of the lap of luxury, they still hadn't figured out how to take care of the basics.

But for the time being, they didn't care. Trent was occasionally grossed out by the smells from the kitchenette and would throw open the window and clean out some slop. Had he lived alone, Philip's apartment would have been bare and dusty and he probably would have only eaten fast food. But Philip was living with someone who could be counted on to take care of something. And so the filth accrued.

The filth meant nothing to Philip. His new project took the rage and resentment of being ignored throughout his life, all that energy, all that contempt and all that need for love and focused it into a perfectly coherent energy.

Philip's frustration this particular day was that he wanted to make something big and bulky and worthless seem to transform into something small and heavy and valuable. And he needed to make a mass of stuff disappear in the process. He was creating a machine that would turn dirt into silver. The dirt had to go somewhere.

"I've got $2300 from this year and $2800 in savings."

"You have savings?"

"I guess. On my birthday, Dad always gives me a hundred dollars for every year I manage to stay alive. And I convert it into… whatever."

"Grass. Hash."

"Whatever."

He had blown so much birthday money collected over his long life and right now he regretted it. He started to think out loud:

"Maybe we could rent a warehouse outside of town and set up the magic box on a large closed workbench. We put together a couple of random number generators connected to light boxes. And then we need something that makes really a lot of noise so that you don't hear the dirt fall into the space below. Something that makes pounding noises."

"I think first you need blueprints for your machine." Trent was being practical, or so he thought. "And technical specs. If you're going to convince anyone of anything."

Trent had never seen Philip actually interested in something. It was pretty surprising. Normally, Hawkes was satisfied listening to himself talk, impressed with his own superficial wit and with his father's supposed value. How good Philip was with a turn of phrase, with a sharp retort. It warmed Hawkes's very own and very tiny heart to think about it

Over the years, being Philip's audience had twisted Trent's soul, and Trent was finally noticing it. As an athletic and relatively bright kid, Trent didn't need the likes of Philip to build his confidence. Still, circumstances had brought him into regular contact with Phi-

lip and into familiarity with the Hawkes family. He should have been able to walk away from that more easily, he thought. But in high school, being associated with an odious soul puts a boy in a weird position: other people rejected them as a couple of some sort, as a pair. People read into anything Trent said, no matter how innocuous, a faint echo of the shameless narcissist. And so, outside of track meets, the athlete was stuck in a room with Hawkes. He made the best of it.

One afternoon, the clear knowledge of his circumstances came to him all at once, like the knowledge that can wake you up in the night and tell you, *You too are going to die, and everything you are and have done will pass away.* Trent looked out the window of the apartment towards the parking lot below and was filled with shame at his own weakness.

"Russell Erskine Hotel. In the restaurant at the top floor. That's where we'll have our first meeting."

"Is that a joke?" Trent snapped

"That old lady who owned Linda's place back then told me about it."

"Well the Russell Erskine Hotel has been closed for a few years, Philip. And it was a dive for years before. Man you are completely floating in outer space. You would listen to that lady?"

"She's authentic Huntsville."

"Right." Trent grabbed his coat and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?"

"For a walk. This place stinks and I'm sick of doing the dishes. Why don't you do them?"

Chapter 79: 1957

Being dizzy was infuriating. Tamara could no longer simply roll over and get out of bed. If she tried it, she would feel the entire room spinning like a carnival ride from hell. And the sharp headache in her right temple would awaken. No, not possible. She placed one foot solidly on the ground, turned a bit and waited for it all to stop its gentle twirling. Then she slowly raised her torso, hoping the twins wouldn't start yelling, all the while hearing the movements in her inner ear, and waiting to be steady enough to stand up. Prepare, move and wait. Prepare, move and wait.

As she stood up and focused her eyes she was suddenly struck with a clear knowledge. She would soon be dead. It was a stunning fact. She turned away from it.

She looked at the clock. It was earlier than she thought. William Daniel was still draped across the bed, the covers kicked off of him. She swiped her robe from the chair and waited again for the spinning to stop. She wanted to pick up her slippers with two fingers but that was too much work. She slipped her feet into them, steadied herself, and shuffled quietly out of the room. She closed the door behind her and looked down at her feet. When she looked up, she had to shield her eyes. Down the long corridor, light from the sunrise had diffracted onto the grey tile floor and created a glare that extended all the way down the hall. She looked down at her feet again. Time passed. She slipped her arms into her robe. She

wasn't even thinking. She couldn't call that thinking.

By the time breakfast was on the table and William Daniel was reading the newspaper and the kids were eating quietly, Tamara's dizziness had calmed down.

"How could a whole God damned country like Germany go mad?" William Daniel asked, his nose in the paper.

"Is that a real question?" she ventured.

"Well yes it is."

"Well, they didn't have anything to eat." Tamara seemed to wonder how he could have missed the fact. "Yes, boys, you can leave the table."

"And?"

"Go brush your teeth, can you do that boys?"

"Yes, but going absolutely wild, barking mad?"

"Someone told them that their distress was the fault of someone or other, but certainly not the fault of the Kaiser," Tamara said.

"I'm not buying it," William Daniel looked up at her.

"Imagine Alabama with nothing to eat. Already some Klansman are absolutely nuts, raging and nuts. Alabamans would be just like animals given the chance."

"No animals don't do that." Bell said and closed the paper.

"Animals aren't equipped to do that. Were they, they would."

"A whole damned country doesn't go mad because it has nothing to eat. A whole country full of fat Romans went mad before. It's not because they were hungry, but hungrier than they thought they should be. Hell, if America thought that something gave it the right to special treatment, America, the capital of the free world could go nuts too."

"When the frontiersmen started moving west 300 years ago,

everyone in this country, everyone with weak characters anyway became mad and bloodthirsty."

"But why?"

Chapter 80: 2011

Something rising

"Cucumber sandwich?" said the little boy. "Can't I have a barbecue beef or a cheeseburger?"

"Well, if you don't want cucumber, there is a Welsh rarebit, but that will be kind of bitter for you."

"Rabbit? I don't want to eat a rabbit."

"How about a grilled cheese sandwich with tomatoes?"

"What's that hairy stuff on her plate?" The little boy pointed to the plate of the very old red-headed lady with the sparkly t-shirt at the adjoining table.

"Don't point."

"That's all right honey. He's never seen this stuff before," Lulu said. "It's called bean sprouts and it's goo-oo-ood. Want a taste?"

"No no, that's all right Mrs. Bell."

Lulu could not place the mom and kid at the other table, but she thought to herself she must know them from somewhere. Forty years ago everybody knew the man on her arm, so of course they knew her. But today, she usually didn't have that strange feeling that everyone knew her name. She shook off the anxiety and turned back to her conversation.

"Tamara Spencer was an interesting woman, Madison. She just died young. That was your grandmother, you know, genetically as they say." Her voice trailed off; Lulu was distracted by the people at the other table again. Did the woman and the little boy come to Petteway's every Saturday like she and Madison did?

"You ok?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just having a senior moment, I guess. What were we talking about?"

"Grandmother Tamara. I'm sure she was interesting. But you're my Gran."

"I know I'm your Gran."

"I don't know why we care about this."

"Because these things will be lost when I die."

"You're not going to die anytime soon Gran."

"I'm 87. That number mean anything to you? Does it spell old and ready to kick the bucket? Yes, it does. So, listen up. This is something your own children will want to know and you should be able to share it."

"I don't have…"

"Shut up. You will."

Silence hung in the air. Madison could not identify the feeling that invaded her at that moment. Why was she not feeling weepy or fragile, with all of this life and death stuff on the table? She looked at Lulu, who was turning the spoon in her ice tea glass, and who looked fragile and worried herself.

"Look," the old woman picked up again, "I don't want to stick my nose into your affairs. Not really. I just want to make sure that things get said between us. Important things."

"Oh Gran, you're gonna make me sad." Yes, some tears were welling up from somewhere. But sad, they were not sad. They were something else.

"No. No. No. I just want to say that I don't think there's anything wrong with you. You saw the doctor, you're healthy. He saw the doctor, he's healthy. You are young. I'm going to guess you're just not ready for some reason. Maybe you should just relax about this money bags thing. Maybe you're just stressed out. Anyway, forget I said anything. All is well."

"All is well," Madison said, and noticed that Gran was telling her not to think about the postal bags every time it came up. And sometimes when it didn't. "All is well Gran. Don't worry about me worrying."

"William Daniel told me about your grandmother many a time. She was like you in a certain way. Very effective. A leader. She was a union organizer for a few months before she died. When she knew she was going to die she hired a housekeeper and spent time doing that."

Madison knew people said she was a leader, that she was effective. But Madison felt like a fraud right now. Her research was getting nowhere, she was half checked out of her job as CEO of Bell-Garth-Woolson, she had succumbed to an erotic moment and in her head at least, abandoned her marriage. Like Tamara Spencer had abandoned, what? Her husband and kids?

"That's strange," Madison finally said.

"She had brains. She wanted to use them before she went. She wanted to have an effect on the world."

"Daddy doesn't even remember her."

"Yeah, in the last months she didn't spend that much time with your Daddy and uncle Spencer. Papa Billy Dan and Uncle James – your grandmother's brother took care of them for the months before she went. Maybe she wanted to take a little distance before pushing off for good. That's how she decided to finish things off."

"I don't think that's very nice Gran. Poor babies with their Mama there and not there. How could you knowingly let someone you love suffer? When you knew you had something they yearned

for and you refuse to give it?" The tears were ready to break. Powerfully somber tears. Yes, somber that would be the word.

"She separated more gently from them, you know. Than if she was all cuddly and then up and died. They got used to the affection and attachment of their Papa. It's kind of hard to figure out what's nice sometimes, Madison."

"Excuse me. Powder room…" Madison said, and headed towards the Ladies'. The tears had emerged before the door closed behind her, and underneath those tears a Lion's roar. What was this, exactly? Why did Gran not want her to think about this money?

Chapter 81: 1972

Phillip took a handful of nails in his hand and dribbled them back into the wooden bin. Three fell on the floor.

Trent bent down and picked them up. "What are you doing?"

"Did I drop something? Who would know? This place looks like a sort of dirty Disneyland don't you think?"

"It looks like an old hardware store that sells hunting apparel and hats."

"Kind of smells like rust."

"Look Phil, I don't think we should buy anything here." Trent whispered. Somehow, he had forgotten his decision not to be a part of this scam. "This is Fitzsimmons Brothers Hardware Store. Everyone in this town comes in here, and everyone knows everyone in this town."

"I don't think they'd have what we need anyway. They will have mirrors. I would guess. But no Geiger Counters. No reverse biased transistors. No Gas diodes or thryatron electron tubes. I guess we'll have to lift that at work."

"This is going over the top Phil. I am not getting myself fired so you can play your boy scientist games."

"Dirt! Look at this! They have bags of dirt! Perfect! I have heard that this establishment is a devolved version of its earlier, glorious self. It used to be a haberdashery and the wealth and elegance of

this city used to convene here to determine the future of Northern Alabama."

Trent just looked at him.

"and now it sells… dirt," Philip concluded.

"This is high pH dirt. Very expensive when we can go dig up some in the woods."

"We'll tell him it requires a special sort of dirt, a special chemistry."

"We'll tell who?" Trent knew his question was disingenuous.

Chapter 82: 1957

William Daniel Bell woke up the first day after his wife's funeral to feel the warmth of the twins tucked into odd corners of the blankets. He had been dreaming that he was bordered by large sleeping puppies. The puppies had tucked him into bed the night before, carefully folding the linen sheet embroidered with Tamara's initials under his whiskered chin. Then someone stretched the sheet over him, so that his body looked small and feminine like Tamara's form as it had been pulled out of the drawer in the hospital morgue. The puppies turned out the light.

One of them sneezed: he was not sure which. As they had every night since Tamara was taken to the hospital, the twins had climbed into bed with him somewhere in the middle of the night. He pulled himself gently up and slid out of bed, trying not to touch either of them. He covered them better and turned to leave.

"Daddy?" One was awake.

"What do you want sleepy head?" His wife could tell their voices apart, but he couldn't.

"Can I get up?"

"You can. Yes. If you want to. But I think you're still sleepy."

"Still sleepy," mumbled the twin.

"Still sleepy," his daddy echoed as he slipped the door closed.

William Daniel tiptoed down to the bathroom at the other end of the hall and slapped a trickle of cold water on his face. In the mirror his eyes looked grey and his stubble was 24 hours longer than it should have been.

Over coffee and toast, he thumbed through *The New York Times* without really wishing to read it. He would take the boys to work with him today. All that newspaper advertising for expensive clothing, pricy underwear and leather-lined shoes got on his nerves. He still wore the same things he'd had when he married Tamara. He closed the newspaper.

The three of them would leave late, after he had got them fed and conveniently dressed. Neat and clean, said Tamara, the rest was not important. But they would have to go with him. He couldn't take off another day. He had to sign a contract.

*

All morning long, he kept the boys at his side. A tactless question could be terrible for them. No one would have the gumption to say anything while he was in the room.

At lunch William Daniel did something inhabitual: to avoid sympathetic eyes and murmuring in the lunchroom, he would take them to the *Ol' Bavaria* for something to eat. There, the small room would be full of military officers and German families who didn't really know him. Most wouldn't even know who he was. A little privacy.

They walked in to the sound of an oompah band. The hostess in her German costume leaned down to say "Hallo" to the little boys, but they held on to their father's pants legs and did not look at her. She seated them in a booth near the music. William Daniel looked around to see if there was a better spot.

"Is it too laut Mr. Bell?"

"No this will be fine, thank you."

The music was not that loud, but William Daniel found it invasive. He set the boys to work on cat's cradle. They were good at it, he observed, carrying on for several minutes before losing track. He soon realized that it was not just the music which encroached on him, but all of the noises and conversations around him.

Bei mir bist du shèsne

"*Schön*"

"No that's a *Jewish* song.*"*

Something broke in the kitchen.

"*Wenn er willt…*"

Means 'you're grand'

The dessert cart creaked and jangled by

"Why can't I have one?" a little girl whined.

Bell let out a deep breath, as if he had been holding it all morning. His boys were quiet, their fingers moving through the strings. They didn't need to speak to each other to communicate. They somehow knew what the other one was thinking at all times. They disagreed from time to time, but even their disagreements were silent or at the very least extremely cryptic.

"There are no Jewish songs," said the person at the table next to him.

"I'm tellin ya."

"*Ja genau, aber bist du…*" William Daniel couldn't tell who the German speakers were. They were apparently a few tables away.

Money landed noisily in a glass bowl somewhere and the twins squeaked with pleasure as they finished their game and started again. Bell felt like he was drowning in sounds. The cups and saucers clanking in the sink. The tingle of jumbled silverware. The hiss of the expresso machine. The sounds of sizzling fat — in

fact, the smell of fat and ham and beer and gingerbread and words emerging from it all.

18. The problem is. Ja. Scheiss. Don't talk like that. Neunundneunzig. In fact it doesn't work. Silly giggles. *Cash. Well yes.* **See the marketplace in old Algiers.** *No! Not. Not me. Thank you ladies and gentlemen. See you next week.*

A waitress passed by carrying gingerbread teddy bears with jelly bean eyes to another table.

"Can I have one of those Daddy?" said one of the twins. The other repeated "Can I have one of those Daddy?"

"We'll see. Let's wait till the lady comes to the table and find out."

"Why wait?"

The thump of the espresso filter on wood rattled him and the noises invaded again. The rush of beer on draft. *He wanted nothing from.* Money, money again landed noisily in the till. *Thank Gawd we are not in France, they have dogs in the restaurants.* **Just remember when a dream appears, you belong to me.** *Algiers would be nice?*

He looked at the boys.

"Yes you can have one of those. After you eat your whole lunch. Are you thirsty? How about a glass of milk?"

*

Back at the office, he showed them how to create the Eiffel tower with string, and they watched very carefully and laughed. Then he showed them how to make Jacob's ladder, but it didn't make such a hit with them.

"What is Jacob's ladder?" they asked.

"We'll talk about that later. Just work on the Eiffel Tower. I'll be right back. Stay where you are"

He didn't need to say that, because he knew these boys: they were deep in their difficulties with the string games. They probably wouldn't even look up before he came back.

He sat down in front of his secretary in the outer office.

"Any ideas Miss Kendell? Don't say 'Your mama.'"

"Ideas Mr. Bell?"

"About Oran and Spencer"

"About Oran and Spencer."

"Oh dear. For taking care of them you mean. I would certainly not have said your mama. Mrs. Bell's other aunt?"

"She lives in Montgomery and she is older than the war." He regretted that as soon as he said it. Miss Kendell herself was much older than the war.

"Hire full time help I would expect."

"Do you know anyone Miss Kendell?"

"Let me give that some thought Mr. Bell."

"Thank you Miss Kendell."

One day, Miss K would most certainly retire. And he was a little ashamed to be eager for the day. Especially at the moment, right now, in the middle of this very serious time. He smiled politely at her and stood up and dusted off his trousers and looked at nothing in particular, and then walked to his door and cracked it open. There were the two of them, placidly working at their string games. Tamara's coloring and freckles seemed to paint the toe heads and bright faces of the little boys. She had been so lovely to look at. Such an interesting and serious Southern woman. And in the last year of her life, so detached. As if she knew she would die, so it was better not to get too wound up in things. He too felt detached now.

PART 3
The world that doesn't exist

Chapter 83: 2011

We won't talk about sex

Madison took in Jake Pierce as he stood at the reception desk, waiting for her to come from some other direction. Between them, the receptionist was chattering on the phone. Mrs. Bell-Garth held her breath. His jacket was grey linen, a bit crumpled, but a good color for him. The gold light poured into his brilliantly clean dark hair with those 140 strands of grey. He looked so damned healthy. And unlike the first time she had seen him, he looked a bit nervous. He had no idea, no idea the effect he had on her. Wasn't that for the best? Maybe she could just slip back to her corner office and continue reviewing proposals as if she had not been paged.

He turned just a little and caught her looking at him. She stepped forward and he clasped her hand in both of his.

"We won't talk about sex. We'll pretend that doesn't exist." Jake didn't even have a sly look on his face when he said it. She opened her eyes very wide.

"Well that's kind of you. You do get right to the point don't you?" Madison stepped him away from the reception desk stifling a smile. Sally was still twittering on the phone, thank God.

"Or if you want, we can." This seemed to be a perfectly reaso-

nable alternative to him, from what she could tell. She laughed and raised her eyebrows one more time.

"Forget I said that." He looked down and shook his head.

"Well, let's start with hello, don't you think? Hello."

"Hello."

"How are you?"

"Well, and you?"

"I'm just peachy, Jake." Was that too flippant?

"I can't do this. Some sort of a genetic defect. I don't do small talk with anyone. But with you, I don't know what it is about you. If I try to say anything except exactly what's on my mind, I end up saying the dimmest things." The warm pastels and greys of the walls in the building, the way the light and shadow moved as a breeze blew through the trees outside, the thought occurred to him that all of this stuff seemed to be her. "Did you design this place?"

"Yes I did."

"You can see that. Let's have lunch. It's lunchtime."

"I thought you didn't eat lunch." She was walking him toward the glass door with the elegant pewter writing: Bell-Garth Woolson

"I'm eating lunch today. With you. At what, ...?"

"Petteway's." She didn't even hesitate. How was that?

"I was thinking time, but fine, at Petteway's."

She just looked at him. What was doing the talking here? Did she have any control over her mouth? She just agreed to have lunch with the man. This man. The man who… she didn't let herself finish that thought.

"Just a minute."

She walked back that long hall to her secretary's office shaking her head.

"Everything all right?" called out her lawyer.

"Yeah. Yeah. I'm ok. Sort of." She was mumbling by the end of the sentence. She grabbed her bag as she looked over at her

assistant. “Trish, could you give Lulu a call and cancel lunch today? We were supposed to meet at 1. But I’m going now, got an appointment.”

“I’ve got Mr. Garth on the line.”

“Tell him I’ll call him back around 4.” She blew a long soundless whistle out as she walked back down that long hall to reception. “This is a mess God. Help.”

“God helps those who help themselves,” her lawyer chirped.

Chapter 84: 1972

The Bluffers

The long-haired Asian kid needed to find a herd to hang out in. Even though his life was profoundly solitary Matt Hoshi needed a family unit. He was an evolutionary biologist. He knew the importance of anchoring a human being in a stable unit.

Matt spoke to his friendly NASA colleague Sam Burns. Through Sam, Matt had found his way into the far reaches of the Bells' poker-playing entourage. Burns had been part of this game for a few months, 'to get away from the wife,' he said. Matt Hoshi sparred with all the old guys around the table from the first time he joined a game; these people liked sparring. They were pretty good at it.

"So: Who's bluffing at this table?" Hoshi tucked his long hair behind his ears.

"Anonymity is a good thing in poker, boys " George Bell chawed the end of his cigar "because it's such a bluffing game. Here I am with my super smart brother who knows me inside out. How the hell can I bluff? I'm out of this hand."

"Me too," Edwin Reese Peterson slapped his cards on the table and looked to Bell's twin sons on his left.

"I'm out too," said Spencer.

"Me too." Oran threw his cards down.

Nancy Miller considered the rather motley group of men around the Bell's dining room table, one at a time. And then she looked at her husband.

"I'll hold." She put her cash in the kitty. "I'm optimistic. Man has landed on the moon. I can still win this hand."

"You go on girl!" Lulu emptied Nancy's ashtray.

Sam Burns slapped down a card, took another and threw a bill down.

"One small step for man…I'm with ya."

Everyone looked at Sam for a minute, wondering what he had up his sleeve.

"And by the way, Nancy," he said "Man on the moon is history. You've got to think about the future."

"And the future is not pie in the sky, Nancy." Her husband offered her a sharp look.

"Yeah well, no one here knows me." Matt Hoshi put his money on the pile and ran his hand through his long hair.

"What the heck is NASA going to do now that it has reached its goal?" Lulu put a beer by Matt's wrist.

"I've seen your résumé and I've read your article in The Lancet, boy." Bell knew that Hoshi's hair-stroking was a sign of stress, so he took it that he could stay in the game. He put his cigar in the ashtray and dug a hand into his pocket.

"Don't be calling people boy." Edwin Reese just couldn't believe he was hearing this expression out of William Daniel's mouth.

"I'll see your two (that is a two-dollar bill isn't it?) and raise you five. What the hell is a biologist doing at NASA anyway?" Bell looked right at the young Asian man.

"Thinking about space critters. And the effects of space travel on DNA.You guys: Mrs. Bell's had a good question for you… what's next?"

"What's next about what?" Oran asked.

"For NASA?" Don was looking at his cards. "Whatever you are doing now I guess. Let's get back to business. I don't know anything about the future of space travel but I know what I have in my hand. I'll see Billy Dan's five and I'll up you twenty," He grinned.

"Twenty?" This seemed to disturb William Daniel.

"Out," Nancy said. "I'm out. All that expertise and nothing planned... Lucky NASA is not on the market. They'd take a beating."

"They've got some sort of a plan." Matt was mildly amused.

"Just not a big plan," Edwin Reese Peterson said.

"He's bluffing." Sam lowered his chin until he was looking up at Miller from under his brows. Don just looked smug. He repeated himself. "No he's bluffing."

"I never bluff," said Miller, who had relaxed now. "I think NASA will put its knowledge to work on commercial satellites. It's a shoe-in."

"I'm out," Matt said. "As long as they stay out of war, it's ok by me."

"Aw shit," said William Daniel. "Twenty?"

"That's a two and a zero on the bill, Mr. Bell." Matt sat back in his chair.

"Why don't you just pray? Maybe your God will make you win this hand." Don was very satisfied with himself

"Do not test the Lord your God. I'm out. Nah, I'm out."

"Dang it, you are rude, Don. I'm out too." Sam was cheerful.

"What'd you have?" Matt reached over and Miller slapped his hand hard.

"Pay to see. That's the name of the game."

"That's the name of the game," sniffed Edwin Reese Peterson.

"But it hurts don't it?"

"He was God damned bluffing. I told you he was bluffing." Sam shook his head, just a little irritated.

"I never bluff." Dr. Miller was a little cold.

"Yes you do." Nancy shook her head. "All the time."

"He counts cards," Bell said.

"Everyone counts cards." Lulu had been playing the handmaid during the entire game, ice tea, potato chips, beers.

"He does the statistics. Like Naphtali," Edwin Reese said.

"Where is Naphtali anyway?" Lulu asked

"Home with the girls."

"Counting cards is statistics. Why don't you play?" Nancy asked Lulu.

"Don't like to. But I like to watch. Y'all say much more interesting things when you are concentrating on the game, you know?"

As the game wound up, the Huntsville friends speculated about the future. Nancy was pretty sure that government investment in commercial satellites was a good idea, but what for exactly? Hoshi said in the future probably spying would be done from satellites. Nancy snapped that the feds would have to partner with private industry. Financing that would become very complicated, Bell thought, and the government would have to put a lot more in the pot than they signed up for. There would have to be some sort of intense cooperation between banks, lawyers and the administration. Then the government would become dependent on industry, Nancy though. Don said that "the administration" was a very vague expression. Did they mean DARPA? It had certainly grown accustomed to very big fat budgets every year and would fight tooth and nail to keep control of them.

"No one needs to create any partnerships. The military industrial complex has been alive and kicking since the War." Edwin

Reese said.

"Which war?" Matt asked.

"You guys sound like Huey Newton." Don said. Everyone around the table laughed except Edwin Reese.

"Don't get me started on that. My girls are vulnerable to that stuff. It does not make me laugh."

"Did you see him on the TV? Gawd! That picture of him with the gorgeous rattan chair and the two guns. Gave me goose bumps," Lulu said.

"Why would your girls be vulnerable to that?" Nancy asked.

"They are young Black women. With expectations. And the world is not changing fast enough for them."

"That sonofabitch is feeding all sorts of racism himself." Don was really irritated now. "Conspiracy theories about the CIA, the State of Israel, white bread America and Jewish bankers. Fuck him."

Nancy turned to him and said "I beg your pardon?"

"You heard me. In fact, go get him and kill him. That's the solution."

"The role of the military is to protect the nation from outside attacks." Bell said. "It is not to kill stupid citizens. And it is not to build up markets and support industry."

"Is NASA the military?" asked Lulu.

"Yeah, technically," Matt said

"The role of NASA, military or not military, is to pay my salary," Don snapped.

"I thought you were a contractor," Lulu said.

"Yeah, technically." Don looked at the wall. "But I depend on them. I am one of the 'army' trained to work on the moon project."

"The future of physics, I'm afraid of this, is not in science, but

in finance," Nancy said.

"All that bullshit quantum finance on Wall Street. That's just bullshit." Don retorted.

Matt listened to the conversation from that distance that young intellectuals have when they listen to their elders. These guys Don and Sam knew so much, and had no sense of the direction the future was really taking them. Their ambitions were old ambitions. Their conversation rambled on about what computers would be able to do in the future, as we learned how to make use of quantum models. They were interested in the physical sciences, as if the physical sciences were disconnected from biology, from human life. It was going to be possible to make all these 'things' that did 'stuff'. They would use advanced statistical methods and their knowledge of physics to make things go faster and work more efficiently. They would use probability alone to make ethical decisions. Like Don argued about using the bomb at Hiroshima. Statistically fewer deaths to use the bomb than not to use the bomb. Of course the statistics only predict linear events. The fallout… Matt Hoshi had to say something, even if it was kind of out of the blue.

"Ok, you guys, now imagine this: Imagine that scientists can see that at birth, some people have a high probability to suffer. We can see that a lot of them will end up vagrants. Alcoholics. They certainly won't finish a high school diploma. On average, a huge percentage of them will end up on drugs. They will join mafias and get involved in petty crime or big crime, going to prison and costing the state a lot of money to keep them alive in their pitiful state. So, imagine genetics allows us to predict these facts when they are babes in the womb. What do we do?"

"Abortions," Don said.

"Men have no idea what they are talking about," said Lulu.

"Good God, Don," Nancy said.

"Well, it's logical. It's even kind of nice," Don said. "To them. To spare them."

"Well now," continued Matt Hoshi. "We can do that right now, in 1972. Because from outside non-genetic information, information that exists in police stations across the country, we know that that is the situation of black people."

"Negroes," said Don. "They aren't exactly black."

"And then American Indians. And your linear logic and statistics bring us straight to genocide."

Chapter 85: 2011

The conversationalist

All through lunch Jake did his damnedest to avoid all talk of sex or sentiment or anything at all that referred to men and women. None of that. All that doesn't exist, he said to himself. There's no point. He wasn't too sure what the point of this was, but there was some point, that seemed clear. Huntsville was full of women. Full of brilliant women even. Lots of them with that celebrated southern charm. But he had lived out of town for too long. They all seemed like butterflies pinned to a board. Madison Bell-Garth didn't. She was alive. She just talked to him naturally. So, he thought, the hell with it, he would just talk to her.

"Everywhere we went we ran, me and my Dad. Ever since he did the Atlanta Marathon, we ran. Going to the toilet at the gas station? We ran. Ran to the mailbox. We ran in the supermarket. We just didn't move if we weren't running."

Madison Bell had a look on her face. This is too personal, he thought. This is too *'Wasn't I a cute little kid with a charming life?'* He looked at the wine glass in front of him. He didn't know where to take this. And he didn't know why he was feeling, he didn't know what this feeling was, feeling so ... whatever...change the subject.

"In other news..." He fiddled with the bean sprouts on his plate, not looking up. "if you look at the research, you can see that the events most searched on the internet in the last four months…"

She burst out laughing. It made him laugh too, looking up at her.

"Why are we laughing?" he asked.

"What was that transition?"

"I don't know. Anyway everyone is looking up the Japanese earthquake, the killing or not killing of Osama bin Laden, and something about a homeless guy who got his voice back. And a live recording of a fatal motorcycle accident."

"That's awful. Ghoulish. And peculiar."

"It's not that peculiar. People are living the news like middle aged ladies used to live gossip. People want to interact with what's happening. They want it live, fatal, visual, astonishing."

"Hmmm. My husband is a little like that." *Shit,* she thought, *Don't talk about your husband. It's a betrayal even to talk about him.*

He ignored the reference and the look on her face and carried on.

"They want to be able to debate about reality, say I think it happened like this or like that. They want to see people who find themselves caught directly in the grips of tragedy, whether the reality is clear or not. Like during Hurricane Katrina. Were people looting or helping their neighbors? In fact, it's better if it's not totally clear. Then the people behind their screens can argue about what really happened, you know, 'all those people didn't really jump out of the WTC, they were blown out the windows by explosions' or something."

Shit, now she has another look on her face, thought Jake.

"That's pretty grim isn't it? Sorry."

"That's ok. What are we doing here Jake?"

"We are having lunch. We are talking." He refused to miss a beat. "Have you been abroad?"

She spread her hands, pushed out a sigh and answered anyway. "Yeah. I travel a bit for my work."

"Of course you do. Of course. Has it changed you?"

"Wow. There's a question. What are we doing here?"

"Becoming friends."

She blew her long signature whistle. And he waited. He didn't expect her to answer. But eventually, she did.

"I guess when I first went to Italy when I was in architecture school it made me pretty full of myself. I felt quite proud to tell everyone that what was interesting in Florence was not the buildings but the paintings inside the buildings. I went around telling everyone that Italy had invented beauty. So I guess it made me pretentious. Then I got to know some other people who travelled a lot and ... and knew more about Renaissance architecture. I calmed down. Now I focus on home."

"Why are you interested in these weird stories about the history of Huntsville?"

"A mystery emerged in my life. A really big one. I'm doing research. I don't want to talk about it right now."

"Maybe I can give you a hand. With your research. I do that for a living you know."

"Thanks, I don't know if I want to talk about it right now."

"Ok. Change subject. What's your favorite building?"

"Did you write yourself a list of interview questions?" Madison shook her head.

"No. This is my natural, spontaneous gift of conversation."

"You are funny as hell. Ok. Buildings. It depends on what sort of building you're talking about. Falling Water. The MIT Chapel. La Sainte Chapelle. The Guangzhou Opera House.

"The MIT Chapel is a chunky piece of work, no?"

"The inside of it. I really don't know. And then some weird places no one has ever heard of."

"Try me."

"The Camera Obscura on the Santa Monica Palisades."

"Got me. Never been there."

"And you. What's your favorite newspaper?"

"*The Huntsville Times* in the old days. My great great granddaddy founded it. Had to fight to keep it. Lost it."

"Lost it."

"Lost it and lost it again. In the 1950's it was lost to some guy who bought a Birmingham paper and didn't even know he was buying us."

"Bitter truth."

"Well, no, my favorite paper is probably the Washington Post."

"You don't sound like you come from Huntsville."

"Neither do you."

She didn't know what to say to that. He picked up the thread:

"So, ask me: *'Have you traveled?'* Why yes I have. Nepal. Libya. Long time ago. When it was safe. Cambodia. Zhengzhou."

"Djung-joe? Where the hell is that?"

"China. You get the picture. Backpacking kid. Going to be Hemingway when I grew up."

"And now?"

"And now making a plan to take back *The Huntsville Times*."

"What are we doing here Jake?"

"I can't tell Madison. I just don't know. But I wouldn't miss it."

Chapter 86: 1987

"That world doesn't exist anymore Madison. Those company towns where the boss owned everything. We have cleaned all that up." Papa Billy Dan was talking to his nine-year-old granddaughter from his recliner.

"Cleaned it up?" Madison was playing "Cats Cradle" and not looking at him.

A long conversation had started when she wondered out loud why he always played with knots. Then Papa Billy Dan started talking about his childhood world, where toys were rare, and time for playing was always too short. For the first time, he spoke long and low about Howelltown, that company town outside of Chattanooga, about how heartless Thomas Howell had been when he evicted families affected by the Great War.

"Well it wasn't very fair was it?" Gran Lulu put in her two cents from across the kitchen counter where she was drying the dishes. "The boss owned everything and you owned nothing. Zip. Zero. Nada. So if he had problems and fired you, you were up the creek without a paddle, weren't you? You didn't have a chance to save more than pennies. Can you imagine? That's what happened to Papa Billy Dan's family."

"Mm. That's terrible." Madison looked worried.

"Well, we managed a little better than that, honey," he said.

"That's because they had *unusual* resources." Gran Lulu said tipping her head. "They had Papa Billy Dan…"

Madison was still little enough to sit on her granddad's lap sometimes, although her gangly legs had started to grow enough so that she could no longer find a comfortable position.

"Anyway, all that stuff is gone. All those people are gone. All those old-fashioned things are gone. Did you know that with the old cars, like my first truck, you had to crank them up to get them rolling? Uncle Georgy helped me. He was just a year older than ***you***."

"Ten years old?"

"Yup. Thank God he was a strapping boy: he would be in the driver's seat and I would run up front and crank the hell out of that thing until it got going, then run back, push him over and get in. You never drove anywhere alone unless you really needed to, you know?"

"Can you imagine what happened if you were on a damned hill and the truck stalled?" Lulu asked.

The little girl slipped off her Papa Billy Dan's lap onto the floor and Gran Lulu laughed. This irritated Madison a little, so she picked herself up and threw herself on the sofa, curling into a corner.

"Hey William Daniel, have you showed her those old *Heritage* books with the pictures of Huntsville in 1922? What a mess it was. And Fitzsimmons Brothers, with those fat old mustachioed men in vests with their gold watch chains looking so proud of "theyselves." They never smiled like that in real life, did they William Daniel?"

"Well in 1922 when I was in town, I didn't have the time to look at those guys. I was ten or eleven and I had things to do. But they sure weren't smiling during the Great Depression."

"What's the Great Depression?"

"A time when everyone got suddenly very poor. The banks closed. No one could get their money. People lost their houses."

"Did you lose your house?"

"They didn't have much of a house to lose honey," said Gran Lulu. "Just an old cabin out in the woods."

"Did the men at Fitzsimmons's Hardware lose their houses Papa Billy Dan?"

"Well it was Fitzsimmons's Haberdashery at the time Madison" Gran Lulu said.

"No, not to my knowledge Madison," Her Grandfather replied. "But they sure looked like they lost something."

Chapter 87: 1961

The National Committee to Abolish the Poll Tax

"I had to scrape together six dolla's for the poll tax and get proof from the IRS that I had paid my taxes before I could vote the first time." Lulu lit a cigarette and blew a big puff of smoke.

"Six dolla's?" Sherry seemed frightened by the sum.

"Six. I had not voted the three previous years. Three times $1.50. I was just a kid. That was a pile of money to me."

"Three times $1.50." Sherry repeated.

"Foah." The word came out of the mouth of the woman next to them in the lobby of the Methodist church building.

"Pardon me?" Sherry looked at the speaker. She was black as night and dressed almost exactly like a member of the Women's Society of Christian service: white gloves, white voile dress, white beads. She had a spray of fresh orange flowers on her straw hat.

"Four, I said. Excuse me. But three years plus one year is four years."

"Right you are. Louella James?" Lulu drawled as she stretched

out her black gloved hand. The question was meant to ask *and you?* But it caught the woman in front of her off guard.

"Sorry, no, you have me confused with someone else. I'm Mrs. Peterson."

Lulu laughed and Sherry smiled and shook her head.

"Are you always so literal? I'm Louella James. I'm introducing myself."

"Oh. Naphtali Peterson. Pleased to meet you."

"I like the flowers," Lulu said.

"So do I," Sherry chimed in. She guessed this was how you should speak to a Negro person as an equal.

"From my garden. My daughters put them in my hat as I was going out the door. They told me I looked too serious. I said this was serious business and they said it didn't matter."

"I agree with them. Why aren't they here too?" Lulu touched her own broad brimmed black hat.

"Well," the lady sighed.

"They are beautiful living things, a sign of joy," Sherry said.

"Pardon me? My daughters?"

"No, the flowers. I like that sentiment." Lulu moved one flower just a bit in the hat band. "That one was drooping. Introduce yourself Sherry."

"Sorry Mrs. Peterson, I'm Sherry Bell."

"Don't think a thing about it. Nice to meet you. Are you related to Mr. William Daniel Bell?"

"Why yes, I'm his sister-in-law."

"I'm his assistant."

"You're his Negro secretary." Was that the wrong thing to say? "He thinks the world of you."

"And I of him."

"He says you're his Girl Friday."

"I knew your name sounded familiar. But I do believe everyone in Huntspatch mispronounces it." Lulu was looking towards the door to the sanctuary, which had just opened. "Shall we get a seat?"

The three women joined what was called at the time "an integrated audience" of black and white women, and a very few men. This meant the white and the colored ladies were invited to split up to sit on opposite sides of the aisle. All of them had accepted the invitation from the Women's Society of Christian Service to see the famed speaker from the ***National Committee to Abolish the Poll Tax,*** Virginia Foster Durr.

As the presentation got going, Sherry Bell realized that Ms. Durr was not watering things down for them. She fumbled for a paper and pen in her purse: she wanted to take notes so that she could reread them later and understand all this. She wrote down something about how the 14th Amendment to the constitution was supposed to give everyone the same treatment before the law, which would mean poor and rich men alike should have exactly the same rights to vote. And then something about how the 13th amendment, which abolished slavery should have allowed even ex slaves to vote. But it didn't and the 14th didn't work either so there was the 15th. And then the 19th which gave women the vote. And somehow all these amendments were not working well together to do their job to let black people and white women and poor white men vote in federal elections. But she didn't really see how all of that fit together except that somehow it was the fault of people asking for money from voters.

Lulu was just delighted to listen to Virginia Foster Durr recount her ladies' luncheon stories, and drop the names of all those families and thank all those famous people who she was working with on this project and go on and on about how much fun Eleanor Roosevelt had been all the years they had worked together on the New Deal projects, and then suddenly hone in on a policy issue.

And as the story telling went on, punctuated by facts and figures, Lulu began to understand that all these stories about clubs and cliques were important. This politics thing, Virginia Foster Durr said, was about "navigating in shallow waters among many shoals of frightened fish." It was about getting groups of people to somehow swim in the same direction; it was about making it clear to a variety of different groups that their interests were basically identical. And then it was about getting money and frightening the high-profile politicians who stood in opposition to your project because they were afraid of someone else. Here the silly politicos were "positively panicked" by a few very small and nasty KKK *factions* when they should be afraid of anti-poll tax movement supported by a very large percentage of the population. Lulu was shaken out of her reverie by the voice of Naphtali Peterson.

"You say, Mrs. Foster Durr, that we need a new amendment. But you just said the 13th Amendment read with the 14th and then the 15th makes poll tax illegal. Isn't the constitution about boilin' down the law of the land to its essence? Why not just enforce the law that's already there, instead of adding ingredients?"

"Thank you for your question, what's your name again?"

"Mrs. Naphtali Peterson."

"Why what a beautiful name Mrs. Naphtali Peterson. So, to answer your very *shahp* question Mrs. Peterson, the problem is three-fold. First, it is not all that quick and easy to get the States to obey the law!" Several people laughed in the room. "To do so, we have to get some people to try to take their complaints all the way to the Supreme Court, saying *The State is violating my civil rights*, and then they have to win their case. This completely knocks the lives of those people out of kilter for many years. And it is very expensive of course. Some lawyers take on cases for free, but even if all the legal fees are covered one way or another it's expensive for individuals. What happens when you have to work part time? Or when you're fired because you are absent too much? Or because you are just so worried you can't think straight? So, it is not so easy to get people to fight."

"That makes sense," Lulu responded out loud.

"Yes, it does." Mrs. Foster Durr spoke straight to her, and then looked back out across the entire audience. "People have to be practical. Second, when cases are complex, like when they argue for viewing one amendment through the lens of another, well, your chances of winning are slimmer. And some cases will have already denied whatever argument you are trying to make. Third, the problem is in the nature of the Constitution itself. Or let's say, the way we choose to read it. Some wish to read it following the letter of the law, some following the spirit of the law. I'm sure y'all have heard of these ideas before."

"I have." Naphtali spoke.

"Well, so we want an explicit amendment that will allow those judges who are reading the law literally to understand. We think it is going to take a very big, very brave, very populous movement that addresses many issues connected to race in order to make this happen. Are we in ladies and gentlemen?"

"I'm in," Lulu said.

"Me too." Sherry said.

Naphtali Peterson nodded, but she wasn't sure this was going to work.

Chapter 88: 1971

Sam Burns shambled down the hall scratching his wet head with a towel. In the shower, he had heard sheets of water pouring down on the wooden deck of this old house.

He put the coffee on and wiped up the leak around the faucet. He was going to have to do something about that if he was going to put this place on the market.

Leaning against the counter, he listened to the water splattering along the redwood railing that he had oiled last weekend. The birds were hiding somewhere in oaks. Not even the chipmunks were out. He would not be riding his bike to the Arsenal today.

"One of these days I'll have to see the Tour de France." He said it out loud.

His wife was already gone. Had she been there she would have missed the point anyway. The house smelled like burnt toast, and a wet pink towel was hanging over his dining chair. He swiped it up and threw it with his own towel into the laundry room.

He noticed a piece of cold bacon in the frying pan and popped a couple of biscuits in the toaster oven. That and a cup of black

coffee looked like breakfast.

Carolyn was in a hurry. She had an important job now. She didn't give a crap about breakfast. Had to get to E.F. Hutton and into the fray early; she had competition from a very funny lady with her wig on crooked.

Frankly, that was fine with him. Every time Carolyn walked into the room these days she mocked him for whatever he was doing: the way he dressed, the music he listened to (The Doors these days), the article he was reading in Physics today or the math puzzle he was fiddling with from Scientific American. If he actually stepped out of line, she just screamed. It was foul and it was contemptuous. He wasn't sure how they got there.

He switched on the little kitchen TV and watched aerial films of fires breaking out across a valley in Los Angeles. Freeways fallen on rows of cars. A problem with a dam. He turned off the sound. A big earthquake yesterday, apparently. Young people carrying water in plastic containers of all descriptions. Water sloshing in a swimming pool.

He recalled meeting Carolyn all those years ago sitting next to a swimming pool, the way they immediately connected, that banter about power-plays in relationships. She was a feminist she said. He liked that idea, but he didn't know exactly what it meant.

Everything just happened so fast. He could tell he should have put the brakes on, watch the turns in the road, but he felt incapable of it: she made him laugh and made him think, and she was beautiful. He felt like they were inventing life together, making up an entirely new set of rules day by day.

Almost as soon as they married, he discovered the panic down deep in her soul. He saw her afraid of so many everyday things. He saw her unhinged over a water heater, over an oven that she couldn't turn off, over a zipper, yelling because the vacuum cleaner was … what… full? At first, he laughed. They laughed. Problem

solved. Calm returned.

But soon there was adrenaline and cortisol coursing through their bodies over problems that they both knew he was going to solve in a heartbeat. Calm returned with more difficulty.

And the world provided endless opportunities for panic over nonsense. What is it now? He shouted from the other room. This rubber band! They key won't turn in the door! There's a draft in the entryway!

She had grown dependent on him. And her dependance did not make her grateful, but more and more irritable and demanding.

She lined up her trivial panics and day after day he stepped up to calm them… until the morning he finally said, "Look, if you are the feminist, maybe this is the time to get strong. See a shrink. Learn how to solve some problems. Find out about whatever scares the shit out of you."

To her credit, Carolyn Burns did just that. Sort of, anyway.

Eventually, she started focusing her anxiety on the numbers in the stock market. She was not bad at the numbers in the market. She got a job. It was good. But it could be better: she wanted Sam to apply mathematical models to the market like her crazy colleague's husband did. But Sam did not want to and did not have the time. It was just an opportunity, he thought, for more anger. More contempt.

She was still the same physical human being she had always been, the same classical bone structure, the same golden hair. A shorter haircut, better clothes. But after several years at E.F. Hutton she no longer did the thing to him. Her features had hardened into a sort of smooth mask. Her body no longer responded to his touch.

He turned the sound on the TV back up.

More aftershocks in Los Angeles. That dam was going to burst. People were packing their cars to evacuate. Helicopter blades made

a lot of noise above the journalists trying to ask people how they felt as they got the hell out of wherever they were.

He turned down the sound: it was too far away, and it just brought him back to his life. His house was falling apart, his wife was exploding, his sex life was gone, his job was soon going to go as well.

"Too many deaths at once," he said out loud, and then wondered what the hell that meant.

One thing at a time. Leave this house and this marriage. She'd been threatening to leave him for two years. Time was up. Time to get out. Time to leave IBM: The NASA contract was kaputt. Time to focus on what he could do, what would make him happy. He thought that might be to become an entrepreneur with a couple of government contracts of his own. Maybe collaborate on contracts with some of the independents in town.

On the TV, the images rolled by soundless: cracked foundations, split chimneys, people carrying milk bottles full of water and buckets full of water and the shaking going on and on. Screaming babies.

Carolyn's screaming about everything she did not understand. It had taken its toll. He told her about his plans to create a start-up. Said he was going to be fired by the Huntsville team anyway: a group of retirement-age government scientists had picked up the IBM project after government funds were dried up. He told her that even if he wasn't fired, he'd end up working on some boring business mainframe thing at IBM in Altadena California. He was not a developer of advanced tape drive technology. He was a mathematician.

"You are a mathematician? What does that even mean?"

He ran his tongue over his teeth and looked at her squarely and decided not to answer that question.

"I don't give a damn what you think you are, Sam. You can't just quit a well-paying job on a whim. Money. Mortgages. Car

repairs. And if we wanted kids?"

"And how much does it cost to move to Altadena California Carolyn? And can you get a job in E.F. Hutton in L.A.? And without a network there, how long will it take you to start making money? Learn how to count." He walked out of the room.

She said she wanted the financial stability, but really, she didn't want anything to change at all. But, the world turns. Change comes whether you want it or not.

And Sam Burns didn't give a rat's ass about this argument anymore. He didn't give a rat's ass about her panic attacks, about her golden hair or about stability. He liked Huntsville. His poker buddies were here.

He put his coffee cup in the sink.

It had stopped raining. Maybe he'd bike in after all.

Chapter 89: 1962

The twins, Spencer and Oran, had turned ten years old that day. Bell handed each boy five two-dollar bills, one bill at a time. They were surprised and pleased, but also a little confused.

"Savings. Would you like to put that in the bank today, or would you prefer a money jar for your room?"

The boys decided on a jar, where they could see their money even if they did not spend it. Then each one ripped open his Etch-A-Sketch and Erector Set and seemed satisfied. But as Bell looked at his twins, they seemed too big for the toys, these tall and lanky kids. William Daniel Bell was thinking about his wife that day, and so were the boys, he thought.

"Let's go buy us a car, guys, what do you think?"

"A red H_2O car at Fitzsimmons Brothers!"

"Two. Two red H_2O cars at Fitzsimmons Brothers! No, a blue one for me."

"Let's go buy a bigger car than that."

The three of them went to Scotty's Automobile Dealership. The little boys wanted to buy a new car, a shiny red Pontiac Grand Prix, but their Daddy explained to them that a 1957 Chevy was the best car ever made, and it was the right value for your money. No need to spend more money to have something of lower quality. After a

test ride, he said, because you must be sure of your investments. The boys chose a mint green 1957 Chevy Bel Air with red leather interior. William Daniel put down cash, drove the twins around for about half an hour. The boys waved their hands out the windows and told him to honk the horn again and again and he complied.

He took them finally to the parking lot at HH Industries.

"It's Saturday. Why are we going to work?" they both said at the same time.

"Well, I learned to drive at 10 years old. Course our automobiles were not powerful machines like a 1957 Chevy, but they were much more complicated. How about y'all try out your hand behind the wheel?"

The boys did not say a thing. They looked at their Daddy with identical stunned expressions.

"Y'all feeling brave?"

"I don't know" said one and then the other.

"Well, how's about this? We'll make it your first lesson. We'll learn how to prepare to drive today, how to check your tires, set your rear-view mirrors and pull the seat up enough. And if you're still interested, you can learn how to use the clutch and start the engine. We can continue another day."

"Yeah," they chimed. "I want to be the first to drive."

"I'm afraid we'll have to draw straws for this."

Driving home through the woods, as they approached town, they saw cars parked by the side of the road and people looking up into the sky.

"What are they doing Dad?" the two asked.

"Oh, they are trying to see the man in the moon."

The two of them scanned the sky

“There’s no moon.”

“No, there is a man in orbit around the earth today though.”

“What does orbit mean?”

“You know what orbit means Spence. We did that in science yesterday,” Oran sniffed.

“It’s like a man going around the earth in a plane, but a lot higher up. Too high for anyone to see.” Daddy said.

“It’s John Glenn in the space capsule?” Spence tapped his dad on the shoulder: “How fast is he going?”

“I think I read that he is going about 17,000 miles an hour Spence.”

“Woah. How many times faster is that than what we are going right now?”

“That’s about 500 times faster than we are going driving now.”

For a minute neither boy said anything.

“Can we stop and look?” Oran asked finally.

“Sorry, you won’t see anything guys.”

"Well, you showed us that if you look at the sky for a long time, all the faint stars will begin to appear." One of them said.

"That's when it's *entre chien et loup*. It's daytime now." Spencer and Oran looked at their dad like a couple of sad puppies. "Do you remember what entre *chien et loup* means? It's when the sun has gone down, but you can still see, but not well enough to tell the difference between a dog and a wolf." They just looked at him. "It’s your birthday, so let's stop and give it a shot."

Chapter 90: 2011 HPD

Every trace of mud

"This is some sort of financial crime. You won't see anything at all until you have understood the money." Bertine Kobehi had hijacked Penn's thoughts. "All the details will be muddying up your mind until you see the money trail."

Penn was stubbornly pursuing his own thinking, not about the money, but about the motives. But his thinking kept on escaping, slipping through his fingers like small muddy fish. Eugene walked all around his pale green bass boat pulling dead leaves out and throwing them in the trash can.

And there again was Kobehi saying "Follow the money, Eugene". He vacuumed the grey deck carpets and noticed they were still a bit damp. Which damned money should he follow? The money that was falling apart after having been buried for forty years?

He brushed down the bench and thought for a moment of the amount of check that Madison had put into her account the-year-old-man Bell died. Was that $264,000 check really related to the 300,000 1972 dollars? The check was worth a lot less than the money in the bags, he knew that. But was it a specific or rather *interesting* percentage of the original amount? He would have to check that out. Bertine would have an idea.

“Nothing. No relation. Why even imagine there is a relation

between those sums? Nothing. This is nothing. This is nothing. This is nothing. This is – whatever it is – long gone. Finished. Statute of limitations. What the hell am I doing with my disposable brain time?" Penn was fairly chanting.

Suddenly he felt the need for some q-tips to take out every trace of mud from between the ridges of the green and white vinyl seats up front. He reconsidered, walked to the garage sink, ran some cold water into a sponge, grabbed the dish soap and washed the seats down thoroughly. And then he dried them.

Mrs. Bell-Garth was doing her own detective work. Was she afraid an investigator would ask the right questions? Why was he cleaning this boat on this beautiful Saturday morning? He never thought about cleaning it before taking it out. And he didn't even want to take it out. But today, it just called to him, the disorder called to him, the filth called to him, even the water spots on the engine called to him as he felt the need to see this boat shining in perfection in the sunlight on the Tennessee River.

He grabbed a towel and put some motor oil on it and went to clean the gunk off his outboard engine. The black gunk destroyed the towel in his hand, and he found that vaguely satisfying. Now Mrs. Bell-Garth was perhaps doing her research with that newspaper man.

"There's the promise of a big mess," he said out loud.

Already there was no budget for this investigation, so no one was doing detective work on it but him and them. If those two got it wrong and published the wrong information, any hope of finding the answers went directly into the trash.

So, Penn was also on it. He cleaned the dashboard and the windshield with some Windex, and then wondered if he should have done that. Some people were very careful about cleaning products. He dried the Plexiglas carefully just to be sure. He had to be on this case. It was the only interesting case he had. So he was on it. Mostly with his mind, during lunch, on weekends and then whenever he looked behind his desk at the incident board.

Currently, during working hours, he was supposed to be preparing to train Kobehi on how to do interrogations. He really did not want this contact with her. And for now, he had no one to interrogate. He e-mailed pdfs on the "Morgan theme technique for police interrogation" and the "Reid system" with notes that said 'Read this'. She often e-mailed her answers immediately: "I've already read this Eugene."

Once he sent her a text message with only the words *"Sifting, straining, winnowing, threshing and interrogation. Comment please."* Her reply came back in a heartbeat: *"Dear Eugene: Sounds like sophistry to me. How's this? Carding, spinning, adjusting the warp and the weft."*

He and Manville had finished dealing with the unsolved murder on the fourth of July; there were no suspects to play with. A gangbanger died. Another gangbanger was badly injured. Neither one had a gun on him. No one was talking. Three hairbands on the playground where it happened. Were young women present? Or were these just from grammar school girls? A bit of hair. Yes, the techies could figure out something from it. But not enough to identify anyone.

So, there it was another case left unsolved, and all was at a dead-end because of "the Omerta." That was his mother's term for the law of silence that reigned whenever she ran into family members. He ran the waxed paper towel over the boat's wheel. He was not one of those who thought of gangbangers as dog food. The case just was going nowhere and it did not capture his imagination. Not even as much as that story about an opossum that broke into a liquor store and got drunk.

He looked at the filthy orange washcloth in his hand, and in his mind's eye he saw an old lady with a penchant for orange and other people's stuff.

Chapter 91: 1972

Mr. Bell looked up from procurement contract he'd been revising. Naphtali Peterson smiled a peculiar smile and handed him a business card:

Wilson Smith
Alchefab
New York and Atlanta

"Do I know this guy?" he asked.

"There are two of them. Mr. Wilson and Mr. Smith"

"Okay, these guys."

"These very young men. No you don't know them.. They said Mr. Mead had referred them to you."

He narrowed his eyes and didn't answer for a second.

"Hold them on ice a bit there."

Naphtali tipped out and Bell stood up and looked out the window at the muddy tracks through the cargo zone. His geeky old friend Hubert Mead, first head of Logistics and then head of R&D at HH Industries, and finally professor of electrical engineering at Vanderbilt. Bell held him in his imagination a minute: everything about Hubert was light blue, grey, disheveled and painfully introverted. The brainy old buddy had died the week before. The Huntsville Times ran a story on him. Bell hadn't had the time to get up to Nashville to see him in a couple of years. He had a hard time

imagining the reclusive Hubert even meeting with boys he did not know, much less recommending that they contact *him.* Bell buzzed Naphtali to come back.

"So, what do we think of them?"

"Men and melons are hard to know."

"Okay, but what do we think of them."

"We think they're smart, they're smart and they're smart."

"That smart?

"Yeah, well, they are smart enough. And they are full of themselves…one a bit more than the other. But also, they are well-dressed. One of them looks like something out of the catalog for Fitzsimmons's Haberdashery in 1924."

"That must be a sight. Send them in, I guess. But in exactly ten minutes come back and announce to me that I have another appointment."

Mr. Bell looked up over his glasses and saw the two expensively dressed young men walk in the door. Had he examined his feelings at that moment, he would have recognized the distant trace of the brewing resentment and intimidation he had felt looking at the smartly dressed men emerging from Fitzsimmons's Haberdashery when he was a muddy twelve-year-old hanging onto his baby brother's hand. But he didn't look at those feelings. The past was the past. The present was the present, and these were not young men to take seriously.

"So, Alchefab is a government cover?" he asked as he looked back at the contract on his desk.

"Nossir," they answered in unison.

He noticed they didn't laugh. He noticed the answer came so quickly that they didn't even seem to be surprised by the question. Still, he was relieved to hear the trace of a southern accent. He continued signing the last two papers in his file.

"We don't see too many dressed like that up here in the woods of Madison County." He looked up.

"You weren't expecting us. Perhaps we should come back another time." The taller one ventured.

"Well, no, I wasn't expecting you at all."

"Mr. Mead didn't…?" said the short one.

"Nope, Mr. Mead didn't."

The shorter one said to his partner,

"Well, look Ray, I guess that means we will need to give him a call again. Ask him to introduce us properly."

"Well I don't think he's going to be doin' that," Bell said.

The two young men looked at each other. Philip Hawkes turned to the older man.

"Excuse me sir?"

"Cause he's dead."

"He's dead." Trent Benson felt relieved that this old guy had a skeptical look on his face.

"Oh my God," Philip said. "I'm sorry to hear that. My condolences for the loss of your friend. Okay, well then…" and the two men stood, and extended their hands, which Mr. Bell shook, still seated at his desk. He looked the short one in the eyes.

"What's your name boy?"

"Philip Wilson, sir."

Trent held his briefcase in his two hands in front of him and looked out the window to where an old black guy was loading boxes on a truck in the rain. He was hoping that after Philip's little chat with Mr. Bell, they would be able to hightail it out of there and forget this stupid idea. But now the old guy was addressing him.

"And that makes you Mr. Smith."

"Yessir. Ray Trent Smith"

"I used to know a Ray Trent Smith. Over by Auburn. When he retired, he had a pretty little farm out there."

"That was my uncle." Trent responded. This part he had prepared, but the adrenaline flooded his system anyway.

"No." Bell said it flatly. The kid was lying. Ray Trent Smith had been an engineer in HH Industries in 1933. He never moved to Auburn. He died in the war. "Awful old to be your uncle. He was a good guy. *You* didn't grow up around Auburn…"

"Nossir. Atlanta, Nashville, and then north."

"Mm Hmm. And you?" He pointed his pencil at Philip without looking up.

"New York, but then I went to college at Vanderbilt. That's where I met Ray. In engineering school."

"Why does your card say New York and Atlanta? Sounds like you have branches." Bell pushed the card across the table towards this Philip kid.

"Well, in fact, sir, it's just for our home addresses. We are young and we are engineers and inventors and we weren't really sure what to put on the card."

"We are young? Good grief," Bell thought. The short one seemed to want to do all the talking. "You guys sure don't dress like any engineers I've ever seen."

Silence. No one moved. The rain was now pelting the window, and Trent watched a black guy in the yard run for cover.

"So, what was Mr. Mead going to call and tell me about you two? You looking for a job? You lookin' to sell me some swamp land?"

Trent blanched, but Philip didn't miss a beat. He spoke a little louder over the noise of the rainstorm.

"Well nossir. It's a business project. You're going to think we're crazy if we talk to you about it. It's something we worked out to-

gether in engineering school and it's sure to make us very rich men one day. Really, we'd just like to make an appointment with you to show you the blueprints of the project at your home."

"I don't invite businessmen to my home."

"When you see it," continued the short one, "you'll understand it has to be strictly confidential."

"No. Not at my home. Call my secretary tomorrow to make an appointment."

Naphtali walked in and said "Your 10:30 is here, Mr. Bell."

Chapter 92: 1963

Turn it down

The Negro baby born in America today, regardless of the section of the Nation in which he is born, has about one-half as much chance of completing high school as a white baby born in the same place on the same day, one-third as much chance of completing college, one-third as much chance of becoming a professional man.

The radio was blasting at lunch. Naphtali felt a sort of pressure in her eyes.

She would have liked to have turned the dial way down. Kennedy had been talkin' all day. First, he issued an order to stop George Wallace's standoff at the door of the University of Alabama. That was riveting. The two young people were allowed after all to register for classes. That was a great thing. Then he commented on this morning's murder of civil rights leader, Medgar Evers. That was numbing. And now this. If she let the President continue to talk to her, she would no longer be able to think about the price lists and accounting papers spread out across her work table. It was deeply boring work, but she needed to focus on those numbers 104160, 53.84, 18% 63.53 6% 70.26: 104161 …

She had a deadline for five p.m. today, and could not stop checking these figures, no matter whether it was mind-numbingly boring, no matter if she was hungry. And Kennedy's idealistic talk brought her son's death back into her guts and now it was rising to

her gullet.

"I'll go back in to the police station on Monday," she muttered. "We will find out who did what to James Peterson."

Her door opened and the girl from logistics stepped in with a tray. Naphtali stood up and nodded hello.

"Y'all want me to help you proof those?"

"This afternoon Suzy. Can you let your boss know I'll come get you in a couple of hours?"

From the other room the sound of the speech droned on.

The heart of the question is whether all Americans are to be afforded equal rights and equal opportunities, whether we are going to treat our fellow Americans …

The girl moved the spreadsheets a bit and carefully set the sandwich and iced tea on the corner of the work table, and tipped out. Naphtali stood, straightened her skirt, and removed her lunch to her desk.

…cannot eat lunch in a restaurant open to the public…

Naphtali Peterson never ate in restaurants, but that had nothing to do with anything. This place was too far out of town to go out for lunch. One of the boys always went out for sandwiches and potato chips. That was nice.

Mr. Bell had this God-awful habit of leaving the radio on, loud, all the way through the lunch breaks. She opened the door to where he and a couple of other guys were standing near the radio listening to the President.

enjoy the full and free life which all of us want, then who among us would be content

"Excuse me, Mr. Bell, but I have a deadline to get this price list to the printer and it is difficult to concentrate."

"Hmmm?" Bell looked her way.

"Could we turn it down a bit?"

"Of course, of course."

Chapter 93: 1963

Turn it up

We have just stepped out of the bus ladies and Gentlemen. Wait a minute. Something is happening on the motorcade in front of us. We were at the front of the press bus. All the cars in the motorcade have stopped. We asked the bus-driver to open the doors so we could get out. Come on down with me Richard, can we move this equipment? Ladies and gentlemen, I have just stepped out of the bus and I'm waiting for our technical people, and all the other reporters seem to be doing the same thing. It's a bit of a jostle. It will take a minute. Yes. Something very serious is happening ahead. It's about a half mile ahead of us, around that curve. Several people seem to be lying face down on a hill up ahead. It's hard to tell what that's about. You probably hear the background noise. That's why I'm shouting, everyone appears to be shouting. Some women are wailing. There are police cars and secret service running everywhere. A crowd is running towards us. Some of them look dazed and are simply wandering this way. Richard are we good? Can we stay out of their way and still move forward?

Naphtali Peterson's thirteen-year-old daughter Mary had stayed home from school that day with the vaguest stomach flu. She finished her strawberry and banana Jello lunch, watching a funny television series about a couple called *Pete and Gladys.* She had just curled up on the green couch again when this astonishing, imageless message took over the television. She sat and listened to the

black screen. Something about those people on the ground: they were yelling. The guy said the women were wailing, not just the children. Then the screen went silent. Then a reporter was standing somewhere in a warehouse or something with a huge fat telephone to his ear, speaking to the camera.

Ladies and gentlemen, President John Fitzgerald Kennedy has been shot in Dallas, Texas. Our information suggests that there were three or four shots fired at one p.m. local time on the Dallas Motorcade. Texas Governor John Connelly was also gunned down. One secret service man seems to have been killed as well. We do not yet know the condition of the President.

Chapter 94: 2011

The Decision

Madison ran her fingers over the Tussah silk jacket hanging in her dressing room. The narrow window cast a shaft of light on the fabric, deep shiny brown, with nubby beige threads and traces of silver. It was elegant, it was relaxed and it was structured. There was this tension between the natural irregularity of the surface and that structured cut. It was beautiful, just beautiful. She realized that this damned jacket resonated very deeply with her. How could she be in love with this jacket?

"Oh my God, his hair."

She walked back into the bathroom, brushed her teeth, put on a bit of makeup and padded back to the dressing room to grab the plum blazer instead, a gold silk blouse and black trousers.

"Does this work?" She looked at herself in the mirror. "Good Lord, what's the problem? It'll be fine. I'm not speaking to the media today."

In the kitchen, Glen handed her a cup of coffee and sat down at the dining table with his own.

"D'ja hear about that Indian guy got roughed up by the police?" It almost sounded like she was supposed to wait for the punchline. But it wasn't that: Glen wanted to talk this morning. That seemed kind of weird to Madison. And inconvenient. She had no conversation in her at all. She looked up from her coffee.

"No."

"Over near the new high school."

"Hmm."

"Just out for his morning walk, casually looking into open garages as he ambled along."

"Hmm."

"Ended up on his face with a cop's knee in his back. Hurt him. He was an old guy."

"Hmm. Well. No end to racism in Huntspatch."

"Yeah. Locals thought he was an agent from Al Qaeda or something I guess."

She didn't respond.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Need to go though."

"Shall we go to dinner tonight?"

"Yeah, why not. Let's talk later."

About Jake, the decision was made: she wouldn't see him again. She wouldn't be available if he dropped in at work. She would not go back to the smell of his hair, the feeling of his hand on her body, the cold of the room when she had slid out of the bed. The look on his face that first day. *Change subjects, for God's sake! S*he pressed herself to make a complete inventory of what she knew about the money. Or what she thought she knew. Or what she suspected.

The money. It was from the late 1960's or just a little later. The two-dollar bills. Two-dollar bills were strange even in the 1960's. In fact, they never functioned well in general circulation. And then that person. The person who lived in her house at the time had either buried it himself or had let someone else bury it there. Or someone had buried it there when he was on vacation. No, that wouldn't work.

The police thought it was related to that time Papa Billy Dan

was scammed out of a lot of money. Maybe a complex set up with an old colleague/friend who would have buried it there. But.

Papa Billy Dan was not involved in any scam at all. No way.

And.

The guy the police suspected — his old buddy Hubert Mead — had died shortly before the con game went down.

There was no way all that money could have been buried in private. And then, who the hell owned her house in the1970's? Not clear at all.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the memory of Gran's voice, talking about Hillary Clinton as they watched the television in the waiting room of HPD. *"I don't know about that woman: I don't trust her."* It seemed to Madison that those words now applied, she dreaded it, to Gran herself.

She shifted gears again. All this thinking was too toxic. She pulled into her reserved parking space next to Bell-Garth Woolson and stopped for a minute. Before she started her research at *The Huntsville Times*, Madison's goal was to find out where the money came from. The problem was simple, but thinking it through was complicated.

Now the problems were multiplying: she didn't know where to turn her thoughts. If she thought about this project, she ended up thinking about Jake or Gran. And that creeping feeling that Gran Lulu was hiding things from her. And that other creeping feeling that Jake was an open book, that she could trust him. She didn't trust herself. And well shit. She didn't trust Gran either.

Chapter 95: 1972

Pie in the sky in the morning

At 5:30 a.m. Nancy Miller had been up a full hour. She'd had a short night sleeping on the recliner in front of the humming TV. At the end of it, her long arms and legs were flailing in the air as she ran away from something. She no longer remembered what.

She'd awakened cheerful nonetheless, thinking she had the time to make that blueberry cream pie for Don to bring into work. It was somebody's birthday. The pie crust was ready to go now, cooling on a rack. The pastry cream was always testy, and she had not taken the time to do it the night before. The shower blasted in the distance. That comforted her. Don was up. Their teenage son would be in bed for another two hours at least. She could get that pastry cream done and in the fridge before her wonderful big kid came loping in looking for his hot chocolate and pancakes. She rinsed the pie crust out from under her fingernails and put the coffee on. She would be ready to set to work on her graphs downstairs at the usual hour.

By 7 a.m., as she was finally putting the piecrust loaded with pastry cream in the fridge, the phone rang. She slammed the fridge door, sucked the pastry cream off her thumb and picked up the phone. As she pulled the tea towel over her fingers one-by-one, she heard William Daniel's story of two young men who had an investment project for him. Lulu was speaking behind him, and although Nancy could not hear what she was saying, there was something hot and eager in her tone. He too had a bit of an edge in his voice.

Something about an investment project, some sort of a machine.

"Well Mr. Bell, how much time did you spend with them?"

Not long apparently. Nancy was very surprised that he would consider doing business with someone he didn't know well. What was Lulu saying now? William Daniel Bell seemed to be knocked off keel by his wife.

"They are friends of Hubert? Did you call Hubert?" She almost suggested he shoo Lulu into another room so they could talk in peace. "Oh. Mr. Bell, I am sorry to hear that. He was a good friend of yours."

She just didn't know what to say.

"A friend, though. Well, let me say one thing. You know, when I was a kid in the early forties, con men would follow the obituaries…"

Lulu had interrupted him for something. Nancy held the phone to her ear and started sorting through blueberries as she waited. And then he was back.

"Yeah so, and these con men would come to the doorstep of the widow or the widower with dictionaries or one volume of an encyclopedia and claim that the deceased had agreed to pay an outlandish sum for the complete set."

She pushed the colander of blueberries away as she listened.

"Yeah. Of course. You thought of that." She said, lighting a cigarette.

What the heck can you do with a friend who is making a bad decision, she wondered. She stared out the back window and watched a couple of squirrels fight on the deck railing.

"a couple of pretty smart kids. Went to Vanderbilt and studied under Hubert. So, what is your plan?"

It was his money, after all. Starting companies was something Bell was good at. Nancy was thinking, why not, it might be an

extra cost for a while, but if it actually worked, a significant income stream might come through after a year or so. Well, if Mr. Bell understood what he was investing in. What the hell was he investing in, by the way? Something significant he said.

"How much?"

He would have to take money out of the market to do that.

"Ok, so two questions: one, what does their equipment do exactly? And two, are you the sole investor?"

When he answered, she shook her head. A lot of rather humiliating remarks came to her mind, but she just did not want to say that to her client and friend.

"Ok. Can we talk before you go any further? Can you get a copy of the blueprint for the machine?"

Now her doubts firmed up. The young men were not giving any concrete information.

"Tssyea. Confidential. Right. Well they must have some sort of a prospectus…"

Don walked in and opened the refrigerator door and saw the pie was not yet ready.

He pointed to the wall clock.

"I have to leave at 7:30," he said.

Nancy covered the phone and mouthed

"Mr. Bell."

Don shook his head and walked out.

"Ok, now, listen Mr. Bell: stall them a bit."

Nancy opened the refrigerator, took out the pie and started arranging wild blueberries on the top of the pastry cream.

"Well that's classic: 'I have an appointment with my banker.' Ask them the name of their banker and tell them your financial advisor will call in and explain the situation and get a new appoint-

ment for them. Or no, tell them your lawyer will do that. If they are shaky that ought to put them off their feed."

Don walked back in.

"Look, Mr. Bell, Don is right here. Can you explain to him this machine?"

She passed the phone to Don without waiting for an answer.

"Yup. So, what is it?"

He leaned back on kitchen counter shaking his head and laughing silently.

"That is the oldest story in the God damned world William Daniel! You got some hucksters there!"

Don squinted and shook his head.

"Yeah, no it's not gold, it's silver, but good God! It's the same idiocy! Lemme talk to 'em. Make some sort of appointment for further discussions, and I'll come in and make short work of 'em."

He swiped a bit of pastry cream out of the pan and stuck it in his mouth.

"Yeah, well, you know what I mean... yeah, I'll be nice. I'm always nice." Dan rolled his eyes.

When he hung up, he just looked at her with big wide eyes.

"He's gone nuts."

"I have a hard time imagining William Daniel Bell is nuts. He called us for help in making the decision. That's sensible. Find room for the pie in the refrigerator at work." She pulled the last corner of the cling film under the pie plate and handed it to him. And thought again about the strange tone in her client's — her friend's — voice.

Chapter 96: 1965

Trickle-down theory

"… it was just part of the filth that we were protecting because we owed personal debts of kindness to vile people," Reverend Gibson said. "Because those people were in our lives from before our birth. We allowed that filth to trickle down into our history."

The pastor was silent for so long that William Daniel checked to see if there was a problem with the radio. The Sunday sermon interested him for a change. Nellie Maude Slade had been acquitted of the KKK assault. What was he going to do with her? She was dependent on him. His family had been dependent on hers.

When the words resumed, Bell was startled.

"It's hard to choose something different. It means open conflict within our homes. Sometimes it means ripping ourselves out of our families or our friendships. Or it means humiliating someone we care for or someone who's "too old to change" by facing them with the facts of their behavior. We want to be nice; we want to honor our duties towards these people. But choosing something different, choosing God's way, well, it's hard and it's necessary. Jesus said 'Do not think that I came to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother…' He says that if you love your life, your friendships, your personal duties and smooth sailing more than you love justice, you are not worthy of justice and you are not worthy of peace and you are not worthy of Him."

Nellie Maude was acquitted; she had walked down the courthouse steps in her orange dress and her bright triumphant smile, feeling like a movie star. She was a small fish, she was white trash, they said, what else would you expect of her? Well, something else, William Daniel thought. After all, that was a deadly attack.

"So. Here we are. Would everyone in this congregation who has no one vile in their lives just raise their hands please?"

Lulu shuffled into the kitchen in her fuzzy bathrobe and slippers, just out of bed.

"You see, we all do. It's not simple to walk away. So, what do we do brothers and sisters? What do we do?"

"What do we do brothers and sisters? Well we take out our checkbooks and write a check to God who will fix it! Can I get an amen? AMEN! " Lulu raised her right hand in triumph.

"Shhh. This is interesting. Come sit."

"I'm makin the coffee."

"We just need to keep praying. For forgiveness, for the grace to remove this stuff from our lives, to remove this vile stuff from our personalities."

"Help from God required," Lulu said.

"It's about racism Lulu."

"Ripping racial hatreds up by the roots is nearly impossible, because, like a mushroom, this vileness is an underground web creeping throughout American society, throughout human society in fact. Its roots are everywhere, just waiting for the right combination of heat and cold and humidity to pop up again."

She handed him his coffee and set out hers.

"Mm. I'm not really awake."

"I'm just thinking about Nellie Maude. Shit. We made a promise to her family. I did. Why did she have to go get involved with

that stuff?"

"She threw stones with the others because it made her feel like an attractive woman to the narrow eyed young men with whom she kept company, William Daniel."

"Teenagers. They were teenagers, good God. Something's got to change. I don't know what or how. But I can't really just pay that woman's way anymore."

When her acquittal was final, Bell decided to move Nellie Maude into a cheaper place, someplace where she could pay her way so he didn't feel responsible for her anymore. Lulu agreed. Time for her cousin to do something, get off her heavy bottom and take a little responsibility.

Lulu had told William Daniel that he should buy one of those lovely rundown old places in the Twickenham District. Someday it would be worth something she said. And she wanted to be part of the investment this time. She didn't have much, but she wanted in. He smiled when she said it.

He contacted the real estate agent and bought not one but two rundown houses in the Twickenham district cash. He sat down with his lawyer and drew up the articles of incorporation for a property management company. They needed some renovation: The Bells evicted Captain McPherson, the father of Lulu's assailant, from number 607 where he had been renting for several years. This brought them a certain satisfaction.

He then asked said agent to cut both number 605 and number 607 up into multiple rental units, in such a way that Nellie Maude could have a ground floor apartment in one of the buildings. She would pay her own way by managing the two buildings.

Chapter 97: 2011 HPD

Three words

Eugene Penn knew that he had not spoken more than three words to Bertine in a very long time. The photocopy machine flashed its green light and he turned the next page of Lulu Bell's diary and centered it on the screen and pressed the button. He was going to need to give her some more in-service training on interview techniques. His thinking had brought into the foreground an old lady who might know rather more than anyone suspected about these bags of money. So, she would be the guinea pig, and he would kill two birds with one stone. Get Miss Priss started interviewing suspects and get some info on Bell-Garth case.

The machine made its droning noise and flashed its green light and he flipped the page, centered it on the glass, and caught sight of Bertine's brown leg out of the corner of his eyes. What the hell could he say to her? He pressed the copy button. The last time they had a conversation, if it hadn't been for Bertine's little old grandma, he might have punched a hole in the wall. Miss Priss had called him a playground reject; told him he was a kiss-ass to stupid people. She didn't even have a sense of humor.

The green light flashed again, he turned the page again, pulled down the cover and pressed the color photocopy button by mistake. One more page and he was finished. She was holier than thou and trying to make him feel guilty. He snatched up the fifteen pages, dropped them off on his work table, walked back to her desk and dropped the diary on her desk. Why was she the guardian of the diary on this cold case anyway? What the hell was she doing with it? He patted his jacket and found his Marlboroughs. He stepped

outside, lit a cigarette and put it out after two puffs.

Back at his desk, he took a swig of cold coffee and realized he wasn't speaking to Bertine, but he wasn't talking to anyone else either. He hadn't thought about it before that moment. He now felt raw contempt for Clardy and Bullard and Dolan and McFee and even the chief and just about everyone except Colleen, who he pitied. He hated his job but he needed to make a living. All he could do was focus more on his work.

"Look at this. How did anyone miss this? There was a telephone call. It's here in her diary," He called out.

"Sorry, what?" Bertine asked.

Eugene did not look at her, but walked over to her desk, picked up the diary, spun it around so that it was facing her, and opened it to the page in question. Manville sidled over to the desk to have a look.

"From or to a certain RTS. They had agreed to 'it'." He put his finger on the sentence and she put a check mark in the margin.

"My God don't write on the evidence." The chief and Detective Penn spoke at the same time.

"It's in pencil," said Bertine

"Great balls of fire girl, what difference do you think that will make to a Harvard defense attorney? He will still say the evidence was tampered with," Penn said.

"Y'all stop calling me girl."

"Madam."

"Don't call me Madam either."

"Oh, come on."

Everyone in the room had made their way to Bertine's desk.

"605 TSR. What could that mean? RTS. TSR. Whose diary is this?" The chief turned the red diary over in his hand and looked

for a name inside the front cover.

"Lulu Bell's. A licence plate?" Bertine said.

"Let's ask her. We obviously need another talk with her."

"She's 90 and losing track. She won't remember a thing. And this is a … cold case, Detective," the chief said.

"87" corrected Bertine.

"She's lost her Lulu," chuckled Clardy.

"Shut up Ewell. If she colluded with the con, there is no statute of limitations, boss. Or there might not be." Eugene watched Manville's face.

"This is a very sharp woman, chief," Bertine said.

"Sharp and fading," Manville said.

Eugene looked at Bertine Kobehi for a second. He liked her. Shit he liked her very much.

"We'll get back to her, Sergeant Kobehi," Eugene said. "There's someone else I want to talk to first."

Chapter 98: 1972

Today was the day. Sam Burns was going to hand in his resignation, effective now. It had taken him months to build up the courage.

The night before, around midnight he had stepped out on the porch to have his last cigarette of the day and he heard chamber music coming from a house a few doors down. It was Holderin and three other German scientists playing Mozart on their patio in the middle of the night. Carolyn complained about the noise when he went up to bed. He wondered what they were talking about so late in the night.

Anyway, everything was lined up. He had saved some money; he'd been to the Small Business Association. He had identified a couple of procurement contracts he could make a proposal on and he'd found an older lady who ran a secretarial firm on Memorial Parkway.

His buddy Matt Hoshi had helped him find a rental office. That was a good friend.

Here's the way it was going to work: leave the Arsenal at lunch time, walk out with his personal effects and go meet Matt for a Wienerschnitzle at the Ol' Bavaria and knock back a few beers. Then, go out to the IBM building to wrap things up there, drop in at the Ol' Bavaria again for a couple more beers and make his way back to face the music at home.

Just before taking off, one of his colleagues popped into his

office whining about the two infamously stupid interns he had working for him now that NASA had dropped them. Sam was so lost in his thoughts that he didn't even understand what the guy's complaint was about. But he did hear them say they were still here in Huntsville more than a year after they were dropped from their grad school program.

"How does that work?" his colleague mused. "Slave labor? Dad has contacts? They're not bright enough to go back to MIT and finish a master's degree? And now we have a Geiger counter and thyratron electron tubes missing from the lab. I don't know what they could be doin' with shit like that. But they are gone."

Chapter 99: 1965

Bobbing through the room

Joseph Torres was leaning on the back wall of the Decatur Baptist Church watching the predominantly black sea of people move in to find a seat. He was a Jewish guy, so he certainly did not go to churches and he did not even go to demonstrations much anymore either. At 23 years old, he was not a dupe: he knew how these political demonstrations should run, and he could see that was not the way things worked in Huntsville. He thought the people running this particular meeting were a mix of those trying to sneak unbelievers into church and local political wannabes looking to make a place for themselves in the future. The interesting people in the Civil Rights movement were down in Selma today. Why the hell wasn't he?

From where he was standing, he watched a round ball of black hair wrapped up in orange, pink and black African fabric as it fairly bounced across the room crammed with people to join a very conservative looking group of Negroes in the front row. He was pretty tall, but whoever was under that Afro was what they call petite these days. Or maybe it was a child. The Afro spoke gleefully to the dark and immobile group she was with, and then one of them — a young woman — looked back up at him and said something to the girl. Now the ball of hair was bouncing in his direction. She wasn't coming to see him, for God's sake; he was a white guy standing alone minding his business.

"You waiting for someone?" The teenager asked.

"What?"

"You can't stand back here alone, a white guy with all these Africans. Makes you look like a very stupid undercover cop. Come on down front."

He was so surprised he didn't say anything for a second. She wasn't patient.

"What's your name?"

"Joe. Torres."

"You Mexican?"

Joe looked at her askance, and shook his head.

"No. Jewish. And you? You Mexican?"

"Hahaha. I'm Mary Kobehi Peterson. Well come on , Joe Torres, come sit with us. There is no more segregation" Mary was joyful and direct and a kid... "Come on."

She didn't wait to hear his answer; she just grabbed him by the sleeve and dragged him on down to her family. For that brief moment as they threaded through the black crowd he was pulled into her optimism and moved to laughter by her joy. And then something grim in him wanted to warn her to be careful with her ample and childlike soul, because things were going to be much more complicated than she thought.

Her family was polite but not warm. It was she who kept stoking the fire of conversation. Eventually he asked her about her African headband.

"Ivory Coast. That's where my family comes from, sold off by a rival clan in the 18th century. Kobehi was their name. Not the rivals. My family."

"Oh come on Mary!" her sister Janine had heard a lot of Mary's African nonsense in the last week. "We don't know anything like that."

"Well, that's not completely true Janine. Some of that was recounted to me by my Granny Malinda," Naphtali said.

"These things were passed down as oral tradition by the old folks Mr. Torres. Might be true, might be embellished. Our Mary holds joyously to her African identity." Edwin Reese smiled.

"Yeah, well her middle name is not Kobehi," Janine said.

"It's a free country!" her Daddy laughed.

How old could this girl be? Sixteen? Seventeen? Whatever. She was about the most politically naïve child he had ever seen in his life. Joe turned his attention to the speaker at the podium; this Kobehi was a Negro and she was obviously too young for him.

At the end of the speeches, people lined up at the back of the church go get ham and cheese sandwiches, pickles, potato salad and shaking Jell-O desserts. Joe didn't know what to do, so he just followed along, balancing the paper plate where he could, pulling off the ham and listening to the conversations around him. A redheaded lady with rings on her knuckles was saying something to Mary's mom.

"But you voted. You voted right?"

"Yes, I did. I voted. I paid my money and I was lucky. No one asked me questions I couldn't answer."

"You know I heard this story about a white country registrar who had the misfortune of seeing the very first negro Harvard graduate, I don't remember his name, walk into his office." The redhead popped a pickle in her mouth.

"I don't know whether that should make me laugh or cry," Mr. Peterson said.

"Well the registrar ended up crying because he didn't know enough to stump the Harvard man. Crying. What are people thinking'?"

"Dunno, Mrs. Bell, dunno." Mr. Peterson shook his head. "Goddam Alabama…"

"My granny Malinda told me stories of the civil war," Naphtali

Peterson said. “After the Emancipation Proclamation, when the Federal army went through a town, a parade of slaves in tattered shirts and pants, shoeless, would follow behind the soldiers.”

“Hmm. Seems I heard of that a very long time ago,” the redhead they called Mrs. Bell said.

“They were dazed and groggy, they did not know what to do or where to go,” Naphtali continued. “They were hungry. They were phantoms. The armies didn’t have much themselves, so the slaves just wandered along thinking maybe they would be taken home to a new world.”

“Yeah, I heard about that too from old Grant Slade,” a tall skinny guy said. Joe hadn’t noticed him standing there. He should have, because he was the only person in the room taller *and* whiter than him. “I was a little kid. Old Grant Slade told me that story the last time I saw him before he died of the black death.”

“Now what my granny noticed was that after the war, the old Confederates in Atlanta dragged along like a bunch of phantoms too. Some of them still had their plantations, but the places were half destroyed and they were dirt poor. They couldn’t afford to plant much more than potatoes in their own kitchen gardens. They couldn’t pay their people who they now were legally required to pay. They didn’t really know how to take care of their homes or even themselves. They were ripped out of their world, and now were dragging around waiting for someone to feed them.”

“Don’t feel sorry for them Mama,” Mary said.

“Good God! Don’t feel sorry for them!” Joe exploded. “They were getting what they deserved.”

“Are you kidding me? I don’t feel sorry for them one bit. But what I’m tryin to say is that all of the South was a wagon train of stunned phantoms. And it still in’t over. And it won’t be soon.”

Chapter 100: 2011

A ghost

Madison looked out of the window of her second-floor office to see a tall, skinny bald guy looking at her house. He must have been about 60. There was something settled in him that she immediately liked. No, trusted. She watched the top of his bald head move towards her front door. Perhaps, she thought, he was with the police. She padded downstairs to answer the doorbell.

"Good morning?"

"Hello, good morning, excuse me, is Ms. Slade in?"

"Pardon me?"

"Sorry, I was looking for Ms. Slade."

"Do you mean Mrs. Slate? She used to own this place."

"I think it was Slade, but it's been a lot of years. Could be Slate."

Madison wondered if he knew something about the stash. But good God, how could she even ask the question.

"I saw this house when it was a wreck. 1971. Maybe it was 1972. Something like that."

"After the fire?"

"Yeah."

"Did you live here?" This piqued her curiosity.

"No. Nope."

"Didn't live here. But you had some sort of connection with it."

He ran his fingers through his non-existent hair.

"Just knew Ms. Slade. It is looking lovely though."

"Would you like to step in for iced tea?"

"Oh, no. Not. Thanks."

"Come on in. You're from out of town?" Madison felt she needed to talk to this person, that he just might know something. She called up the stairs "Glen! Come join us for iced tea?"

"Us? Who's us?" he called back.

"Mr…

"Trenton."

"Mr. Trenton knows Ms. Slate," she turned back to the visitor. "Mr. Trenton, like New Jersey, is that it?"

"Yeah, like that." The man turned towards the bay window and looked out across the porch to the garden.

"Ms. Who?" Glen called.

"Come on down."

"In a minute."

"So, Ice tea?"

"A glass of water maybe."

"So, from out of town. What were you doing in Huntsville?"

"Oh, I was a kid. In school, here on an internship."

"Yeah?"

"Do you know how I could get in touch with Mrs. Slate?"

"You know I've been trying to figure that out myself. But we didn't buy from her, and the county records are really not clear on who she was."

"The county records?"

"Well I was doing a title search."

"Ah. Maybe she got married. She was pretty old though. Ok. I just wanted to say hello, I guess I won't be able to do that. Well, Ms…?

"Bell-Garth."

He scratched his bald head, looked again towards the garden and looked at her squarely for the first time.

"Well thank you Mrs. Bell-Garth for your hospitality."

And he left.

Glen never made it downstairs.

She wondered again if this visitor could have something to do with the bags of money, and then waved the idea away like a cloud of summer gnats. Not this guy. Not him. But she was itching to talk about it. Now who the hell could she talk to? She didn't want to go to Gran right now.

Glen didn't care about this story. It was a weird glitch in his existence, but if he was not going to get the bucks for himself, frankly, why bother?

Madison thought again. She might have spoken to Naphtali Peterson whom she at least trusted, but she barely knew her. Her granddaughter — what was that name? Betty? Beryl? — she seemed trustworthy too, but she didn't know her at all.

Of course, Jake was off limits now. Off limits. It had been three weeks, 21 days since she made that decision.

Now Jake could be trusted. But *he* wasn't the problem. *Well hell, well hell.* Madison went upstairs and showered. It was a hot day, and the cool shower shifted her thinking. She dried off and changed into something loose fitting and unattractive. She could control herself. It was just a damned conversation. And Jake might have some idea how to find out who this guy was.

"I'm gone! Back in an hour," she called up the stairs to Glen. Did he hear her?

Chapter 101: 1992

Strength

Sam Burns caught sight of the deck of tarot cards spread out in Petteway's storefront display and stared at it. He was hungry and feeling scruffy. He'd never been in this place because it didn't look too "meat and potatoes." But today marked the twentieth year of scraping by as a government contractor and it was his 51st birthday, a day for change.

His first birthday present of the day had come from William Daniel Bell who offered him an intimidating opportunity: take over HH industries for a few years under his supervision. Then turn himself into the big boss as the company transitioned to become a major defense contractor.

He didn't know if he had the nerve to take on Bell's offer. He wanted a drink. He squinted at the menu behind the foggy window. It didn't look like they even served alcohol. Beyond the fog, however, there was a blond woman, a bit round, graceful and well, he thought, she had an ironic look on her face. She looked like the Empress in the Waite Tarot, or no maybe more like Strength. He went in through the tinkling door.

As he waited for her to take his order, he studied the mathematical puzzle from his *Scientific American*, measured the image with his fingers and sketched stars on his napkin. He was embarrassed when she finally walked up.

"Sorry, I guess I'll need another napkin. Just fiddling with numbers here."

"Aha. Looks like a game."

"It is a game. A math game. It's my birthday and I feel like playing."

Linda felt a smile spread across her face. The man was radiant and unshaven. With a start, she realized she had been standing there with a silly look for too long.

"Happy birthday then. So. Are you ready to order?"

The lanky guy sat and worked on his puzzle for quite a long time after he finished his sandwich. At one point, she plunked an entire package of white napkins on his table and winked at him. In the background Leonard Cohen rumbled Hallelujah. Sam was so deeply in his puzzle he didn't notice it at first. And then he started hearing it and feeling it warm him.

"When do you get lunch?" He asked.

"At about three thirty, four o-clock."

"Can I hang out?"

When the afternoon ended and Linda had finished wiping down the salt and pepper shakers and bid good day to the cook, she looked at Sam Burns, looked at the staircase and said:

"Get me out of here."

"Sure, where do you want to go?"

"How about upstairs."

Sam looked at her over his mug of hot chocolate. She had asked a good question that required a long answer. And she had a milky mustache. He looked away. You know, what the hell could he do? She didn't know what was going on in the research community and she couldn't be expected to. And she didn't even seem satis-

fied with his explanation for why he left his big cozy company for his tiny business. What would she say when she learned he didn't really know if he wanted to become CEO of a medium sized firm?

"Do you remember when you saw Neil Armstrong bouncing around the moon? You did see that right?"

"I did and I do remember."

"That's exactly the second when the funding started drying up for the Space Center and the scientific programs associated with it. So, IBM and other big company guys like me were no longer funded by their Moon Orbit project or whatever. You must have heard this before. They got fired…"

"or they took off to form little consulting or technical or engineering firms."

"Yeah, firms with very small government contracts. That's what I did. Eventually some of these guys – not me—will develop stuff that will be very important in the 21st century."

"Yeah, like what?"

"I don't know. Mobile telephones the size of a credit card."

"No they won't."

"Yes they will, and those little phones will replace cameras and computers."

"What?"

"Yeah. And TVs"

"Then those phones better be bigger than a credit card."

"You're probably right. Anyway, science is fun."

"Sounds scary to me."

"Weh… some of it is. Innovation is fun." He wanted to grab her by the waist and play with her. He had to look away to control his desire. He hadn't felt like this since he was a kid. "Anyway, good old Huntspatch could be in deep shit pretty soon. 'Cause the

big research companies are going to move unless someone does something."

Linda felt infused with energy. How could they revitalize Huntspatch? Then it occurred to her that this was simply a distraction from her desire to go sit on this guy's lap and kiss him.

"Man are you right. Because if all the scientists' wives and children get bored and embarrassed to be living here," she said.

"then those scientists will not continue with their little innovative companies."

"the families will leave. And the money put into upgrading downtown and so on will be a sinkhole. There will be no more curator for the museum, no musicians for the Huntsville Symphony…" She sighed.

"Even more important, no more mathematics professor for the now reputable university, the junior high school will have no principle and Shearson Lehman American Express will pack their bags."

"No more clients for restaurants... And off we go."

Over and over again she stopped him cold.

"What planet are you from?" He asked. "You just do not belong here. I don't know where you belong, but not here."

"I came from one of those cozy girls' schools in the Northeast."

"You look like that kind of girl. The kind of girl who would have found me too geeky to invite upstairs."

"for chocolate…"

"or anything else. Ok, so really, what really brought you here?"

"I'm sorry, but before I answer that question, I've got to do just one thing." She walked around the table, sat on his lap and kissed him squarely on the mouth, just to get it out of the way, just to stop thinking about it. He was stunned for a split second and then took her head in his hands and kissed her back quite a bit more seriously.

She pulled away and looked at him. “I’m glad we got that out of the way,” she said.

She stood up and went back to her spot and continued her story about her drunken dad, her passive mother, the need to escape, the falling for a weak boy who wouldn’t drink and who wouldn’t hit her, and following that boy to town, discovering his lack of character and that’s it. That was it. That was all she wanted to say. She didn’t know if this Sam Burns guy would just take off if he knew everything there was to know.

“As soon as I saw this place, these geeky guys with their bright eyes,” she said.

“The quirky wives.” Sam wiggled his finger in the air.

“Yes and also the Huntsville Society ladies, the vaguely European taste of the population. I knew I had a plan.”

“You could see right where you could fit in.”

They were both quiet for a moment, having noticed that they were finishing each other’s sentences, having recognized that even after those first two kisses, the desire wouldn’t go away.

“If you’ve been here since 1971, you showed up when it was a muddy mess.” Was he changing the subject so that he wouldn’t go on finishing her thoughts for her? It surprised him.

She stood up, cleared away the hot chocolate and washed the cups. As she was facing the sink, she finally responded to him.

“Now you’re going to know just how stuck up I am. The move to upgrade the old downtown ," said Linda, “that gentrification started with Petteway’s itself.”

“It did?”

“It did. Fitzsimmons’s had been a dusty hardware store with a handsome storefront and peeling paint, and it gradually declined into a hoarder’s paradise. Petteway’s brought fresh paint, lace curtains, perfectly clean windows and young people to the heart of town.”

“Reminds me of Alice’s restaurant in LA.”

"That was the idea: a prettified version of Alice's Restaurant that would attract both the local ladies and the people who were accustomed to University town delis. I replaced Frank Zappa…"

"Zappa's a great musician"

"He is… replaced him with Cat Stevens"

"Not a great musician. You could have gone for Eric Clapton."

"Who's your customer who's your customer who's your customer? It's not the boys, it's the girls, see?"

Chapter 102: 1972

William Daniel Bell felt the acid rise in his stomach almost every time he had a conversation with Don Miller. He wouldn't have said that Don made him feel like a fool — just that every time he spoke to the guy, William Daniel had to take a walk to lower his stress level. He wasn't so sure it was Don's sharp thinking that made him feel that way.

He stepped out onto the terrace and looked out over his property. It registered with him, rather coldly, that in his day, the people who owned any real property in Huntsville were the descendants of plantation owners. Even the Slades had owned cotton fields. That family had slipped into terrible decline, though, finding themselves among the ranks of those they themselves used to call *poor white trash.*

His exchange with Nancy Miller's husband had rattled him. There was something too sure and too arrogant about Don, as if he were part of a ruling class, condescending to explain reality to him.

Today, descendants of the French and English aristocracy that had ruled the South made a living explaining unseen realities to other people: they were the liberal professions—professors, doctors, lawyers. They were not all rich, but most were very comfortable. Where did the rich live in Huntsville? There were not that many. They lived in the Southeast district of town near the forest, in sprawling modern homes modeled unashamedly on antebellum plantations. But mostly the Disneyland plantations were situated on lots not much bigger than their floor plans. Even rich people

here didn't have any real property. Bell had real property.

It was going to be a grey day. The light hadn't quite come up yet, and Lulu in her pajamas was inside turning on the percolator. Inside the homes of the great grandchildren of slave owners, black housekeepers were doing the same thing. These "domestic employees" as the rich called them today, were treated very cordially: because of them the hardwood floors gleamed, the Persian rugs were jewel-rich and dustless. The housekeepers paid special attention to the nooks and crannies of that antique symbol of southern hospitality, pineapples perched atop mahogany highboys and four poster beds, that symbolic sweetness of a world that no longer existed.

Bell grabbed a pool skimmer and fished a few stray leaves and pine needles out of the turquoise water. He and Lulu were attached to the world that did exist. They entertained outside, a stone's throw from woods. Lulu occasionally sang to her guests, and made her husband trot out his party tricks to his dismay. He did rope tricks, but even better, he could identify the birds by their calls, the animals by the sounds they made in the distance, moving through the underbrush. He could hear the slither of a snake from a hundred yards away.

The Bells' parties consisted largely of arguing with people about the way things really were. When they came over, the Millers argued from their lawn chairs and watched the others swim.

"No point in havin a pool if you don't jump in on a day like this Don! Pass me my beer."

Don had a tendency to pontificate from his chair and watch the others swim. Nancy was always so embarrassed not to get in the water. She repeated the same story every time, about how she had almost drowned while swimming in the Pacific in 1956. Whatever Bell was thinking about Don this very minute, these were probably his closest friends.

Of a sultry summer afternoon in that other world of the Huntsville aristocracy, no ice-cold beer and no pool and in 1972 anyway, there was certainly no debate. Everyone was pretending to live in the year 1859. But with modern conveniences of course. Fresh lemonade was sitting in its crystal pitcher in the fridge, waiting for someone to ask for it. Conversations were held on the porch after dinner, and they were long and indulgent and warmly funny and spoke indirectly about connections with other members of the comfortable classes.

Many of the descendants of plantation owners were very taken with the sort of people they were and with the southern lifestyle that they embodied — they had the leisure for reading books and imagining acts of kindness. Nancy Miller, Bell's financial advisor, was torn about that lifestyle. She envied it in fact. She loved the charm, and adored the chintz and the mahogany, the silver and the wry kindness. But when she found herself in social situations with these people, she simply could not help herself.

"Oh my God, Meredith! *Gone with the Wind* is such crap. Fannie Flagg isn't even funny. Have you read any Norman Mailer? Now there's a writer for a modern woman like you. Or, if you want to stick to Southern culture, go for Truman Capote or Tennessee Williams. Carson McCuller. That's incredible stuff."

Meredith and Joanna and Theresa *espoused* genteel acceptance of the new role of the Negro in society, but, well, they admitted that that role sometimes led to inconvenient situations didn't it? Nancy looked away in disbelief.

In fact, every time she had lunched with them, Nancy admitted, when she walked out of the beautiful front door and looked at the lovely lawn in front of her, she felt like a drowning girl finally getting her head out of the water. She marveled at the fact that she still wanted to be accepted by these ladies. But she did.

William Daniel Bell actually knew what she meant: he'd felt the same way as a young company president. They found it charming

that such a young and discreet and well-read man had gone from rags to riches. He was invited into their homes from time to time, introduced to their young belles. And they were kind and intelligent with him, their conversation was warm and lingering, but he just didn't understand them.

William Daniel Bell watched scads of mosquitos skimming the turquoise surface of the water. How did all this stuff survive with the intense doses of chemicals that were in his pool? He looked at the bubbling water pumping under the waterline and checked the filter. It was full of insects, sucked towards the humming drain.

Not all of the survivors of slavery were sucked into servitude in that hushed world of money: only the hand-picked few, the black women and men who knew how to run a household in silent good cheer.

The descendants of most slaves were slowly wiggling out of poverty towards the lower middle classes. Those who had expended hope and energy in the Civil Rights Movement preferred working for Food Giant or the Cat-Fish cannery. If they worked hard and stayed out of trouble, they could afford either a nice apartment near the 7/11 or a double wide trailer of their own with a complete Formica kitchen, wall to wall carpeting and a spot in a mobile home park within the city limits.

Today, in 1972, some were middle aged political and religious activists. They were accustomed to navigating both the Southern gentility that had survived from the days when their ancestors slaved in others' homes, and the virulent racism of white gas station attendants and supermarket employees today.

Bell walked around the edges of his land and kicked pinecones back onto his neighbor's property, not out of irritation, but because he loved the smooth line of the flat land he had bought. He had been *poor white trash* in the 20's. And he wasn't anymore. He wasn't too sure what he was, but he wasn't that.

He looked out towards the kudzu covered trees near the highway. The poor white folks of his youth were truckers, 7-11

night managers, waitresses, bums or alcoholics. He'd done something radically different, because he had been mentored by Mr. Hunt and had learned good business sense. Like the business sense that was encouraging him to invest in this Alchefab equipment.

Bell had walked all around his house by now. He noticed two things: one, he was going to have to get on a ladder this weekend and clear out all junk that had collected in the gutters. No trees: where did this stuff come from?

Two: he needed to get a roofer in here to clean the damned moss off the slate tiles.

Don Miller, thought Bell, Don Miller behaved like he was part of the aristocracy, but he wasn't. Bell knew the facts. Don was a man, like him, who had made it out of tough times.

For some reason, Miller was not at peace with himself. It was really important to prove to everyone that he was of that modern, Northern class: the scientist. Adventurous, brilliant, down to earth and superior. Impossible combination, thought Bell.

Every time he spoke to the guy, William Daniel had to take a walk to shake out the stress. This time he didn't know how many walks it would take. He needed to make an important business decision, dammit, and Don's bitterness had just pissed all over it. How could he ever pull apart the knot and look at the problem coolly?

The coffee was ready and his paper was on the table.

"Hello my love!" Lulu said from the sliding glass door.

"Mornin!" he said and started to slide past her. She grabbed him and held him tight.

"What's goin on in that head of yours?" she asked him from up close.

Chapter 103: 2011

"What do you mean you couldn't bring yourself to believe he had anything to do with the money?" Jake slapped his laptop shut and clicked off the screen of his big computer. He was still pushing papers around on his desk.

"He was just kind of a nice worried old guy. You got the feeling he was doing something on his bucket list, like going back to see an old girlfriend." Madison leaned on the shaky cubbyhole partition and nearly knocked it over.

"Worried? Bucket list?" Jake pushed his chair back and looked up at her. "And he shows up like that, out of nowhere, asking for the person who probably owned your house when that money was buried."

"Well. I thought…"

"Stop immediately or we are going to have to redefine the word 'thought'. So."

"Look, I know I shouldn't have come here. You get it. I'm married, Jake. And I'm depending on you. I'm really sorry. I guess I should go."

"Of course, you should have come here. What are you talking about? This is not sex."

"Ok. Oh God, I'm just."

"Don't be just anything. Get yourself in gear."

"You're right. So, what do I do with this information now?"

"Well, **now** you think. What was his name?"

"Trenton, like New Jersey."

"So, Mr. Trenton like New Jersey, comes in, drinks a glass of water and idly responds to your vague questions. Was your husband there?"

"Glen was upstairs. He didn't make it down before Mr. Trenton left."

"So, put yourself back in the moment, what the hell did he do while he was drinking your water and answering your small talk questions."

"Nothing."

"Was he looking at you?"

"No. He just sort of vaguely stared out the window."

"And you trusted him."

"He was so sad."

"Regretful perhaps. Bring on the violins. Which window did he stare out of?"

"The only window you can look out of from my kitchen: the bay window that opens onto the porch."

"And the back yard."

"and the back yard."

"Did he leave you his card? Did he tell you his first name? He would probably lie anyway. Did you see his car?"

"No apparently he was parked down the street."

"Parked down the street."

"Yeah."

"Ok. Well I would bet that you met the guy who put the money in your back yard. Maybe he was returning for it. Now he has been inside your house and knows the lay of the land."

"Oh my Lord."

"Yeah, oh your Lord. I don't think you should stay there."

Chapter 104: 1992

“What’s an algorithm?” Linda grabbed a second pillow from the floor and stuffed it under her neck, which had been just a little pulled out of whack by their lovemaking.

"You don't know what an algorithm is?"

"No."

“Well, it’s a precise process that makes it easier to perform mathematical operations,” Sam said, looking at her profile.

“Ok. That's a lot of p's. Not sure I understand that.”

“Think of it as a shortcut method.”

“Let’s try it this way: what’s the Sam Burns algorithm?”

“Mmm. Let’s see how I can explain it to you. You know what matrix mathematics is, right?”

“Nyaah… sort of. From long ago.”

“Let’s do it differently. The Sam Burns algorithm is more a method than an algorithm. It’s a kind of trick that allows you to figure out the relationship between a variety of different, well let’s say equations, where you just have very little real information. A calculation trick.” She stifled a laugh. “I can see this is not helping.” They were both laughing now.

“I want to understand Sam. I do.”

“We’ll get there. So, imagine there were three big families all involved in the same murder mystery.”

“They all murdered the same person?”

“No but let’s say one family apparently owned the place where

it happened. And another family was related to the victim. And then a third family had several members that hated the victim."

"Mm Hmm." Linda coughed and laughed.

"All right. So, then you know the way that relationships work in two of the families, we'll call those typical relationships the 'functions' of families A and B. But you don't know how things function in family C."

"Keep going…" she said, hand over her mouth.

"But you know the identity of the daughters and sons and cousins which we will call variables in C and how those "variables" relate to family A." He was very serious.

"I'm lost." She was staring at the ceiling laughing and feeling her sore neck. He turned on his side and looked at her profile again.

"I don't blame you. Forget it. I'll give you some math classes. Then we can do this simply."

"All this detail to play with numbers. I do not understand. It's a world that doesn't even exist."

"Yes it does."

"No it doesn't. Where is the number three?"

"It describes a world that exists. I could write a function that, mapped out, perfectly describes your profile. I love your profile."

"Could you write a function that makes my neck disappear? I hate my neck."

"No, don't hate your neck. Take care of it. I love your neck."

Chapter 105: 1972

Trent kicked his tan leather suitcase to the door of their apartment, one word at a time.

"Shit. Shit. God damned prison. That's it."

"What?" Philip was concentrating on rolling his sweaters and trousers up tight enough to pack a week's wardrobe into a very small space.

"We'll end up wearing striped pajamas." Trent leaned against the door.

"That's a cute expression."

"We'll end up in prison."

"No, we won't. Or I won't." That was it. He'd strapped everything in and sat on the suitcase to clip it shut.

"What? Are you kidding?"

"Yeah. I'm kidding. Have you got your passport and your driver's license?"

"Yes." Trent loathed his answer. His body kept working on an action series that his good sense did not agree with. "I don't want

to rent the van. You do it. In fact, you just do all of this alone. I'll head back up to Nashville to see my folks."

For the first time, Philip registered that Trent just might take a hike.

"Now that's a very dangerous idea." The dark kid said.

"What does that mean?"

Philip pushed his suitcase up against the tan one and came up very close to Trent's face to speak.

"Stop and think. We've got an appointment with a rich and powerful man to sell him the Brooklyn Bridge. Either he coughs up the money and is too embarrassed to come after us, or we don't sell him the Brooklyn Bridge, he goes directly to the police and we are arrested anyway."

"Man, you are twisted."

"No I'm not. I'm smart. And you know it. If we go through with it, we rouse suspicion and we hightail it out to a resort in the Bahamas for a few years and we are fine. We start investing our 300 grand. If we don't go through with it, there's nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. And no resources."

"Shit."

"If you don't like striped pajamas, put your stuff in the car, drive me to Fitzsimmons to buy a shovel, and let's get on out there to that place near the woods to dig a hole. A big hole."

"Christ."

"Jiminy Cricket, Trent! I do not believe I have ever heard you speak like this before!"

Chapter 106: 2005

Bertine Torres Kobehi never thought about her Jewish family except when she was trying to clean that pretty Moroccan lamp with the different bits of colored glass in it. Or when she had to sign her full name. Bertine Kobehi Torres, technically, if she followed the rules. She had always switched the order of the names – or rather her mother had when she started school. A little tiny girl good with numbers like her granny who was called Bibi Kobehi was just too cute for words.

By the time Bertine reached the age of about twelve, she could give you an icy stare if you called her Bibi: she had become a young woman named Bertine. At university she simply dropped the name Torres from all her forms. No one seemed to notice and it didn't seem to matter.

This was not about rejecting her dad: he thought it was a great idea. He was still a leftist and thought of himself as a feminist.

There were other reasons for choosing Kobehi over Torres. For one thing, she was tired of people screwing up their faces and asking if she was Mexican. Upon hearing her last name they did sometimes say she spoke really good English and ask where she

was from. That was kind of funny. And then, the facts: the Jewish side of the family ignored her and her mom and dad, except for a dinner just before or after High Holy Day services and an occasional family gathering. She barely knew her cousins on that side. She didn't need that.

But this Moroccan lamp, this heritage of a Sephardic life, it brought her back into reveries of the Middle Ages and into an awareness of the difficulties of her heritage. And this lamp, this intricate brass lamp was indeed a total pain in the neck.

As she was cleaning it this time, she watched CNN money; some sort of trouble seemed to rumble in the markets.

It's right there, under your feet, under the floor, under the dirt, floating above the underlying. And it's ready to emerge like so many mushroom caps from the forest floor, disturbing and poisonous. For some of us, it will be deadly.

"A horror story on CNN Money," she hissed with her best nasal Peter Lorre imitation.

Bertine focused again on the object in her hands. The glass bits were very fragile, and every time she cleaned this thing, she thought she was going to dislodge and shatter them. And then the brass was so complicated that even when she had managed to clean the lamp without breaking the glass bits, it took her over an hour of damp q-tips and focused attention to get all the dried white cream out of it.

It has been there for years, and you have not known about it. It's the derivatives market, and specifically the credit derivatives market.[drum roll] credit default swaps.

This was boring and exhausting work. She thought she had completed the first third of the lamp, but now that it dried, it was white again. What was she doing wrong? This program was distracting, she could not both clean this lamp, wonder what it meant to be an African American sort of Jew, and listen to someone racing through terminology from her valuation class at Georgia Tech. She

wasn't even sure the blond reporter was using the terminology correctly. And that lyric flow, that Mary Shelley stuff. Good grief. She switched the channel.

It was Albert Shih from MIT Sloan speaking this time, interviewed by Paula Ashling and on the same blasted subject.

"Why will it affect you, middle class America? Well maybe because you bought your home on a government assisted loan and have not been able to make every single one of your payments on time. If that's the case, your loan, you will notice, has already been sold to another financial institution, with a different, probably less advantageous, set of clauses in the contract…"

Albert Shih was so clear, she thought. Wouldn't it be nice if MIT gave free internet access to Sloan classes like they do to the physics classes?

"… Or, perhaps because if you invested your money through your bank, or through a brokerage, some of your money has ended up in unidentified credit default swap packages."

"Does this mean Americans should read the fine print more carefully?"

"Yes, always. But in this particular case, the problem is not the fine print. No. These would be investments where no one knows what exactly they consist of or how much the products are worth."

Like a card trick. No like a shell game.

"Give us a hand here. You mean that no one can predict the future value of the products? No one can predict the market?"

"Noo noo noo. We are not talking about sophisticated ideas of value based on potential future profits, no: we mean that we don't know whether the package you bought is a Tiffany's diamond ring or a box of Dunkin Donuts from 1995. Well, it's unlikely it's a diamond ring…"

Call it finance if you like, but to Bertine, all this stuff was gam-

bling. And God was not crazy about gambling.

When she first took a finance class, she was stunned to learn how derivatives products worked. It was a slow buildup that began with the jarring revelation that money wasn't what you thought it was. It wasn't stuff that you collected that made you more stable. If you believed that money kept you out of harm's way you were a fool, the pastor at her new church said.

But at the same time, the parable of the talents was right. If you had a dollar and kept it in a hole in the ground you were losing money. In order not to lose, you had to put your money to work. But when you put your money to work you took risks. So to hedge your risks, you had to leverage stuff. You had to make more money to cover those risks. And bit by bit, the finance theorists brought you to the point where you actually felt you needed to gamble. You needed to gamble to protect yourself.

"Even if it is an evolutionary adaptation to the world, that doesn't mean it's good." She said out loud.

"Today, according to the Wall Street Journal, the total volume of financial derivatives is said to be nearly 100 times the gross national product of the United States of America."

The journalist seemed to extend this statement on a silver platter to Shih. This will please him, she thought.

"I think it may be a little more than that. "
"How big could this bubble grow Mr. Shih?"
"Well let's not think about it like that…"

Bertine turned off the television.

In her hometown, Huntsville, the city of scientific speculation, everyone wanted to look very smart. Stockbrokers were quick to suggest they understood things they did not understand. They sold packaged products like hotcakes. Some serious financial speculators were beginning to talk about Bitcoin. She'd read an opinion piece in *The New York Times* the other day: "*Bitcoin is a giant*

Ponzi scheme."

Her mind buzzed again. In Huntsville, the smart city, virtual ***anything*** sounds pretty sexy. So why not a giant Ponzi scheme which everyone calls "virtual currency"?

She took a deep breath and went back to the warm water, the Q-Tips and the tiny holes in the brass lamp. This was real. The smell of the brass cleaner had an edge of wild mint to it, probably to cover the toxic odor.

Chapter 107: 1972

The smell of wild mint and mushrooms

The woods had been calling Bell since his conversation with the Millers about those Nashville boys' machine. In the morning, his muffin would fall apart in his coffee, soft and crumbling like a clump of moss. A certain fragrance of wild mint and mushrooms followed him everywhere.

Thanksgiving was coming up, and it brought to mind that day in 1918 he learned his Daddy was coming back home after the war. He had hitched his baby brother Georgy up on his shoulders to march far out into the woods to that chestnut tree. They had filled three baskets with the green spiked pods. The energy and the hopefulness that the two boys felt charged the cold morning with the ghost of their Daddy's presence.

Today, images threaded through his mind during meetings with his staff. Discussions of procurement contracts and logistics were interrupted with brief silences as he thought of the kudzu that crept into corners of the copse beyond the parking lot, or thought about the vines that wound themselves around trees in the middle distance. He recovered quickly enough, but with an irritable edge.

Only Naphtali noticed the little glitches in time. And she couldn't quite tell what these micro-absences pointed to. What surprised her most was the way he could strike out in a flash at her these days. Over nothing, nothing at all.

"How are you this morning Mr. Bell?"

"Not now. Not now."

It was so out of character, she just breathed in a soft whistle and pulled the door softly shut.

Bell leaned back in his desk chair for a few seconds and stared out the window at the woods. An animal climbed a tree. It could have been a cat, but there were no feral cats around. That was it. He changed his shoes, buzzed Naphtali to reschedule his afternoon appointments, because he would be going for a hike. The woods required a visit.

Bell knew where he was headed, and he knew why. He needed to settle something with himself.

His guys on the loading dock watched him stretch his long legs over one felled trunk and then another. He disappeared into the space between the trees. "*How could that happen?"* one of his men asked. It was as if he had walked through an invisible curtain, like a hero disappearing behind a stealth sheet in a Marvel comic book. But where did he go?

Chapter 108: 1969

Get up

July 16th, 8:50 a.m. UTC

Bell knocked on the door of his sons' room and there was no response. It was 3:50 a.m.

"Guys. Guys! Come on, it's time to get up."

He opened the door and switched on the light.

"No," said one

"Nah," said the other.

In Falls Church Virginia, there was a similar conversation between Don Miller and his 10-year-old son.

"It's not even five a.m. dad!"

"Yeah, yeah, gotta get up. You won't forgive me if you don't."

At the exact same time, back in Alabama time, Naphtali Peterson looked out her kitchen window to the other side of the street.

Lights were flipping on in house after house, and the televisions of the entire city were flickering in windows in the distance.

It was almost 1 a.m. in Los Angeles. Matt Hoshi and several of his friends at the UCLA dorms had simply decided not to go to bed that night. No one had come around to turn off the television in the Commons. The kids spent the night sliding off and onto and over the backs of the institutional vinyl sofas like a pack of ten year olds left to their own devices, spilling cokes and dropping cookie crumbs and speculating on what was happening on all those computer screens in the control room. The night grew chilly, and they started wrapping their sweatshirts around themselves and sniffling.

"Does anyone have a Kleenex?" someone asked. No one answered.

"Go to the moon and you don't even know what time it is anymore," Hoshi said.

"Yeah we do, watch the time click by on the UTC clock. Very precise." A long haired blond kid said.

"Uh huh, but…" A kid with a red afro said this, chomping on a candy bar.

"Don't talk with your mouth full. It's disgusting" someone else said.

"But what?" the blond kid put down his coke bottle.

"But they are way up there and we are way down here and time runs differently," the only girl in the room said.

"Runs is a weird word," Hoshi said.

In Denver Colorado, Leola Jefferson Bowles, the daughter of Mr. Bell's old handyman, walked into her daughter's room, turned on the pink light on the bedside table and said:

"Ok honey, 2 a.m.! It's time."

"Don't forget my globe," Alicia said, still asleep.

"I won't."

"And my moon."

"Ok, come on, get up."

Georgy and Sherry Bell had decided to stay up all night to wait for it too. The coffee was smelling vaguely burnt on the stove and Sherry was on the phone with her sister-in-law.

"You guys up? I'm so afraid this is going to be boring."

"Shh!" Georgy said. He was holding his five- and six-year-olds tight on each side of him. "Now pay close attention girls! This is big. This is really big. Ready for take-off?"

9:30 a.m. UTC

On vacation in a small town in Maine, Linda Petteway and her mom and dad had set up a bowl of popcorn and made hot chocolate and a half an hour after take-off, still sat staring at the tedious spectacle of Mission Control and all the screens with blue stripes pulsing down them.

9:50 a.m. UTC

A young marriage counselor in Atlanta named Martha Slade took a last swig of her coffee and a last look at the massive flames of the booster rocket before she switched off her television and went to prepare for the first appointment of the day. As she bathed, dressed, did her hair and makeup, the bathroom radio kept her updated on progress.

"I wonder if this couple will even show up to their appointment," she said as she locked her front door.

In the dragging of the day

In the dragging of the day, 10 a.m., 11a.m., noon,1 p.m. 2 p.m. and beyond, Trent and Philip drank beers in the Hawkes' sunroom watching the show. There was no latest Mrs. Hawkes right now. Mr. Hawkes was in New York.

Eventually, Philip got up and left and came back with his arms full: a package of bologna, some mustard and a loaf of white bread which he threw on the coffee table.

"Where's the knife?" Trent asked.

"Go get it yourself."

Earlier in the day the two of them had laughed about the incredible drudgery of it all. Right now, Philip was losing his patience.

Beep 00758 +all balls + 00niner8 + correction 00572 beep

"Alls balls! Let's just go for a swim." Philip grabbed Trent by the sleeve.

"No I want to see this." Trent pulled his arm away. "All of it."

7:30 p.m. UTC

Mr. Peterson settled in to his big armchair with the nth cup of coffee for the day balanced on the arm. Mary padded over and closed the blinds on the hard sun. Mrs. Peterson stood behind him, with her hands on his shoulders and her eyes glued to the screen.

Go go go go go a series of voices said.

Go for undocking

Hello eagle Houston here we're standing by over.

"Standing by Boxer, are you ready to land?" Nellie Maude was holding a glass of straight whisky in her hand. She looked at it, swirled it, and looked up at her grandfather's picture. "Well, gramps, you didn't live to see this, did you?" And down the gullet

it went.

Beep Roger Eagle undocked beep

Beep The eagle has wings Beep

Beep Capcom we're go for landing Beep

Beep It's still looking very good you're go Beep

Beep We're go Beep

Linda and her mom wandered in and out of the den in their holiday home as the landing was being prepared. Mr. Petteway sucked on a beer and didn't take his eye off the screen.

"Go beep! Go beep! Gogogogo!" Linda twittered.

Mrs. Petteway looked over.

"I'm never going to be able to convince you to speak properly again. You'll be using 'go' in some barbaric way until you're 30 years old."

"Till she's 40!" her Dad said.

"No! Beep! I'll be Beep! Using Beep all the time!

Beep Altitude 1600 Beep

8 p.m. UTC

In Fitzsimmons's Hardware two televisions were on, one pointed towards the street, where locals and a couple of policemen gathered to stare, transfixed. The Fitzsimmons brothers and cousins and Scotty sat drinking iced tea and chattering on folding chairs around the big TV next to the sales tables. Live pictures from the moon were showing in the diner out by the Arsenal, the 7-11 on Drake and in the halfway house for drug addicts on Memorial Parkway. It was 3p.m. Huntsville time. Walter Cronkite was speaking.

Today, Wednesday July 16, 1969 the space age is real. A million people

were gathered around Cape Kennedy on the Florida coast just a few days ago to watch the takeoff of the Apollo 11 mission to the Moon. Right now, we don't know how many people are watching live on televisions across the globe as the Apollo 11 lands. 100 million? More?

"Houston, tranquility base here. The eagle has landed."

"Thanks for saying that. You've got a bunch of guys about to turn blue, we're breathing again." Mission control answered.

It took many more hours for the astronauts to prepare their descent onto the moon. At the same time, in different places, exasperated folks said exactly the same thing.

"Alls balls! Why don't they just get out already?" Philip said.

"This is really boring" said Georgy and Shelley's two girls. "Why don't they just get out?"

"Ah, hum," Nellie Maude exhaled. "why don't y'all just get out of that thing? Go for a walk?"

July 17th , three a.m. UTC

Probably all over the planet people were singing *"They say it's only a paper moon, sailing over a cardboard sea, but it wouldn't be make believe if you believed in me."* At 10 p.m. July 17th, in Huntsville Alabama, Lulu certainly was. William Daniel wasn't listening to her.

"30 seconds of fuel left in the tank? How the hell can they get back?" He asked at exactly the same moment as Don Miller asked it in Falls Church Virginia and as Walter Cronkite asked it on the television.

"There must be a plan Don," Nancy Miller said.

"Yes. There is certainly a plan." Walter Cronkite could hardly control his emotion.

Chapter 109: 2008

Linda Petteway had taken the Obama "Hope" poster to Wilson's to be framed in a rococo pink gold. It had cost her a fortune, but it warmed her heart every time she looked at it. The contradiction between the boldness of the Obama street art and the Versailles esthetic of the frame made her laugh out loud the first time she thought about it. She had to have it.

Someone she knew said she shouldn't put such a politically charged poster on the walls of her place of business. Not a friend. Although she probably lost some hard-core Republican customers to the choice, they didn't normally come in here anyway. They thought she sold marijuana under the counter. Or something more sinister.

She dried her hands and took a deep breath and let it out slowly. It was going to be time to face the music again, for the billionth time in her life. She needed to take the order from Lulu Bell and her granddaughter.

She glanced over towards their table and felt relief: they were deep in conversation as they often were. They hadn't even picked up the new menu.

"Naphtali Peterson was a bright light, Maddie. I feel her fading now. She repeats strings of words, you know?"

"Mm." Madison wondered if Gran Lulu was aware that she had begun doing the same thing.

"You just think of her as a little old grey and brown lady, but she was a force of nature for a woman of her day. Razor sharp. Cool but not unkind."

"You can feel that, can't you Gran? It's like you can sometimes sense a clearer personality behind old people's feebleness than you could when they were more engaged in the world."

"You talkin about me?"

"Nooo. You're still with us!"

Linda sensed that this would be a good time to approach the table, if only to encourage them to look at the menu.

"Good afternoon Lulu, hello Madison. Have you given it some thought?"

"The usual would be nice," said Lulu and handed the new menu back to Linda

"I'm having what she's having," Madison said. "But salad dressing on the side."

"Okay. Did you see we had a new menu?"

"Oh yeah, look at that," the two said at the same time.

"We'll change our order next time, Linda dear," Lulu said. And that was that.

Linda walked back to the kitchen and slapped up the order. Long before she knew Lulu personally, she knew who Lulu Bell was. Sort of anyway. First, she knew because everyone knew who the Bells were. Then she knew because the asshole had become obsessed with the Bells. Then her Sam the Man had been part of William Daniel Bell's inner circle for eight years. She'd been to one New Year's Party with them. At Nancy Miller's house in 1999.

Lulu wanted her cards read. It was all very uncomfortable.

But aside from that, she had managed to keep her distance. Getting any closer, well, it was just too much. All of that horrible crap that that creepy Philip had brought into her life, all that shit that she had to pretend didn't exist. Every time she saw this kind and flashy lady and her discreet granddaughter, she wondered if the old lady knew who burned her houses down. She breathed deeply and thought of what her yogi said to her about maintaining balance in the midst of turbulence. She thought she might start taking yoga classes again at Lowes Mill.

"You can tell who people are by looking at their children sometimes, don't you think?" Madison said to Lulu.

"And vice versa," Gran said.

Madison found herself wondering why she and had no children. Lulu had no children either. Well, she had raised the twins, and she had Madison whose mom died when she was three. Madison was a daughter to Lulu. And a friend. To the end. That was good.

"That's why it's so important to choose the right man. But you are only 30, Madison, don't worry yourself."

Madison noticed that this was the second time in a couple of months that Gran was talking about 'choosing the right man'. Did she dislike her husband? She'd never said as much. Madison knew she could just ask her, that's all she had to do, and she would speak her mind. But she felt too far in, too committed to Glen. Too ... married. She really didn't want to go there.

"Shit," the young woman said out loud.

"What?"

"Oh nothing. I just remembered something. You were saying…"

"Well I was saying you're right. Naphtali had good kids. In 1953 her boy James was in his first year of college and he was only 17. And he was strong and stable. You hear about skinny little white boys doin' that sometimes, but he was a black boy from a colored

school. He was a pistol. Her oldest girl was starting high school, and Naphtali was just a housewife. This was before she gave up hours of cooking in the kitchen every day and took an easier job."

"What do you mean gave up hours of cooking?"

"She had a kitchen garden."

"I wish I did."

"You will. But then you will cook more than before. A lot more."

"Well, yeah... Then I will mostly feel guilty that I can't eat what I produce. Because I don't have time to cook that much."

"That's correct. Well, she was more practical and less *spoiled* than you Madison. She did not feel guilty about wasting produce because she *did* not waste it. She cooked and froze and bottled and canned, like all responsible poor people at the time. It was only when she got a *job* that she discovered Nabisco and Green Giant like everyone."

Lulu sat back in her chair as her lunch was served.

Linda went back into the alcove in front of the kitchen and leaned on the service table. Business was very light today. It was time to have a talk with Lulu. She heard bits of the conversation over the quiet music and the clanging pots and pans in the kitchen.

"…bet her she would finish high school before she did. Her older daughter beat her by a year, but Naphtali did finish."

Madison said something. Probably "Hmm. Okay." with her mouth full.

"High school in those days was more difficult than in your years, dear."

Linda felt like Lulu had been there in the background of her life since Petteway's opened. What she didn't know about Lulu Bell until a few years ago is that she had owned the old house where she had rented that lovely apartment. Sam told her. The Bells must

have known she was renting from them all that time. And so, they had to know at least *something* about her connection with Philip and Trent and the fire.

The younger woman made the same noise again.

"that diploma…" Lulu said. "She pinned it to the wall in her kitchen. To celebrate, she bought a subscription to *The Huntsville Times*, and in the morning, when she was up early ironing, she liked to hear that plop in the driveway."

And the damned cash! How had that little asshole Philip managed to convince William Daniel Bell to give him so much cash? Linda rearranged the silverware in the buckets. How could her waiters confuse spoons and knives? The noise drowned out her thoughts.

"with Virginia Foster Durr. Naphtali Peterson asked the very best question. And Mrs. Durr was very impressed, and was careful to call her Mrs. Peterson."

Lulu Bell was in on the damnedest parts of Alabama history. Linda had heard about this from Sam. Lulu Bell, a little Marilyn Monroe clone in the 1960's at sit-ins and demonstrations, at political meetings and public conferences.

"Why are we talking about Ms. Peterson?"

"Mrs. Because we have to have people we look up to when we're young, and she is a suitable model for you."

"You'll do fine."

"No I won't. I'm not that fine. And anyway, we are just too close for you to see me clearly."

"I'm not that young anyway. And neither is she. I think you needed to point me to her 15 years ago."

The tea room emptied out as Linda strode back and forth from the kitchen to the dining room to the cash register to the kitchen again and again. She kept hearing snippets of this conversation, how Naphtali Peterson had stayed on an even keel when her

youngest girl nearly joined the black panthers. How she didn't bat an eye when that same daughter married a Jewish socialist.

"Yeah, well that's impressive Gran, she's a good lady. But she's kind of old, don't you think? She could keel over any day!"

"Bite your tongue."

"Sorry, that was rude."

Linda wouldn't have blamed Madison if she got up and walked out. Lectures about good behavior models were boring. And what was the point?

"You've got character Madison Bell. You must ensure that you don't let weak people come sap your energy. You need to keep people around you who you feel are in some way better than you. People who keep you honest."

"I'm honest." Madison looked up at Gran Lulu just a little fiercely.

"You are honest in your core, that's for sure. But dishonesty can come harden around the edges of little things in your life, like a sort of crust. All that stuff that says silently or out loud, 'I'm this sort of a person' or 'I would never do that.' Or 'I understand this perfectly.' You never know who you are and you never know what you would do and above all, you never understand much of anything you are sure to understand."

What the hell was Gran talking about? It made Madison uncomfortable. She started to formulate in her mind a comment, something about how impossibly difficult the life described was, when Gran interrupted her train of thought with an unusually strident tone.

"And, Madison, life is hard enough without carrying helpless people around with you. It's like Papa Billy Dan's ancestor said: *If you are not careful, your actions will be solely regulated by the wildness of the people around you.* Or something like that."

Linda heard the trembling stridency of old lady's voice at the

end of the sentence. The wildness of the people Linda Petteway had surrounded herself with in her youth bit her again. And now, today, what could she, Linda, say that would make up for years of silence?

"I don't think that was it Gran, I think it was something about the wildness of your surroundings. Or how about this one, I remember this one: *We are machines fashioned by every circumstance around us.* That pretty much covers the ground, don't you think?"

"I like it."

Linda was not the type to hurry her customers along. The fact that they stayed at table to have long and important conversations was always a good sign: they felt safe and at home and would return for lunch another day.

Eventually the place was empty except for Lulu and Madison. When she saw that Madison was finally preparing to leave, she headed to the cash register. But Madison was not paying today apparently. She smiled and waved and continued out the door.

Linda went back to the kitchen, picked up her mug of herbal tea and went over to sit down with Lulu Bell. Lulu was surprised, but pleased apparently. Linda would see how long this pleasant feeling lasted.

Chapter 110: 1972

Once he receded through the stealth sheet of kudzu into the mint- and mushroom-scented world, William Daniel Bell saw very clearly in his mind that part of the woods where his house had been. It was a six mile walk through the trees and the underbrush, past the once-secured military check-point. The site had been declassified seven years after the military bought it. And now the check-point was as much a ruin as his childhood home had been when his family arrived in the woods. Kudzu had grown over the one-man structure and turned it into an intricate green Moai with a doorway.

It was a warm autumn day, and after a couple of nights of cold snaps, there were some intensely colorful and dangerous mushrooms pushing up their pretty heads.

He wondered how long this pleasant feeling of freedom in the woods would last. At what point would this walk begin weighing him down?

He stepped over the fifth fallen tree in his path and found himself standing in front of a small hillock of branches. He bent down to pick one up. It looked like they had been prepared for kindling

or for whittling, each one two fingers in width and two fingers in length and cut on a diagonal.

And it was already the end of the freeing experience of heading off into his old world. He felt irritated by this discovery. As if someone had violated his territory. His territory? In what way was this anything he might call his territory? And now he was irritated at himself. He swung his right leg over the pile and continued into the muddy woods. He walked deeper in, avoiding the runnels of water on the trail.

Why was that trail beaten? What had been rolling through the path leaving marks in the wet grass? Did he have an occupant, a homeless person somewhere deep in here, in a tent or something?

That idea made him uneasy, and he was forgetting why he had headed into the woods. He saw a movement in the high grass and stepped away. It was not snake time, but you never knew for sure what might be on the prowl.

Five minutes later, he was there, near the spot where he and his daddy had hacked away at a crown root system behind their house. There it was.

"I'll be damned," he said out loud.

And his daddy's voice spoke to him. Daddy was looking at his compass and not out that window at that beautiful fox. *"Around wild animals or armed men if you want to kill them or observe them, just keep silent and try not to move."*

Billy Dan had dug the hole the week his dad died, placed his treasure in it, and covered it with a large rock and then a pile of many smaller ones on top. The pile had fallen about over the years, but some the rocks he remembered were still there: a smooth light grey one, another one just the right size to wrap his young boy's fist around. He wondered as he moved the monument if at twelve years old he intended to come back for it some day. He pulled out his Swiss Army knife and started digging under that ancient pile, and as he did, he heard his mother's voice coming from as far back

in his life as he remembered, from back when they lived in the company town.

"*This is the plan"* she was saying *"Stay away from the creek. Do not go back to the forge. Do not go anywhere the men are working. Go play with Mrs. Slade's kids."*

William Daniel picked up his Daddy's compass from deep in the fragrent earth and watched the hands, though still rusty, wiggle and settle.

"*Do you hear me?*" his mother was saying now.

"Yes Mama. I will stay away from the creek and the forge."

"And from the working men."

"And from the men at work."

"Go play with some kids. And be back before nightfall. Put that down" She nodded at the compass.

*

A week had passed since his trek into the woods. He took the rusty compass into one of the engineers and asked him if it could be repaired. It could be cleaned up, Bob had said, shiny and pretty. But probably it had lost too much substance in all the little components to ever function properly again.

He had the antique device cleaned up of course. But even so, he knew he had lost it, and he felt pressed to go talk to old Mr. Hunt about this and other things.

*

Arriving at the front door of Florence Cove Retirement Village, William Daniel heard an internal voice that said very clearly "No, let's not do this." As his finger hesitated to press that intercom button, he could see himself back up, pivot and walk down the concrete steps past the rock garden and the plastic sunflowers, turn the corner and stroll in the bright block of tract houses with their trimmed shrubs and mid-sized trees.

He would have walked until he knew what to do.

But this time, the only time there ever is, the time when events are unpredictable as hungry racoons, this time, he didn't have the opportunity to turn and walk off for a while, because as his finger hovered over the button, his finger that he was looking at, considering it might be time to turn around and take that walk, as the uncertainty rose from his belly to his thorax, the buzzer buzzed and the glass doors slammed open and a thick young woman in a hot pink carer's uniform thumped out of the building, letting out, loud on a deep sigh, "GOTTA BREATHE. Phew," she said; "gotta breathe" again more quietly and she yawned and held the door open for William Daniel Bell, who was swept into the corridor between two glass doors, and now he felt trapped in the place he felt he needed to walk away from. The second door buzzed and He found himself in that basket-ball court sized reception area with grey vinyl chairs and melamine tables decorated with vases of plastic sunflowers and old copies of Life Magazine. There he was, and he understood why the young woman in pink needed to breathe.

The hall smelled of warm urine soaked in cotton, of pads, of sad urinary drips all the day long. First the salt, then the ammonia.

He looked towards the young woman outside, pink among the yellow sunflowers, as she pulled out a blue pack of skinny cigarettes and lit up, and breathed deep, and exhaled generous clouds of smoke.

He noted that his anxiety had dissolved deep into his bones, where he could no longer feel it, and he noted that now he was stuck. Now that he was in this place he would really walk to the elevator, press the button to the third floor and go see the old man who used to be his compass, the old man he had hoped could help him to resolve his dilemma.

On the third floor, he passed door after door cracked open, a moving leg, a strained profile of a carer, a blasting tv, someone turning in a bed, a moan, an old lady's dress and then someone who said so clearly: 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are

cut off completely.' And sadness arose from his gut, and William Daniel stopped and exhaled slowly, and breathed in deeply and exhaled slowly again.

He expected to push open the door to room 110 and see a frail and forgetful man slumped in his lazy-boy. Instead, he arrived as the now bony Mr. Hunt was leaning forward intently, and pushing random buttons on a remote control.

"Hey Billy Dan!" The old man barely looked up from his enterprise. "Djou know this thing uses digital signals and what they call metal–oxide–semiconductor field-effect transistor memory? How bout that? What the hell would that be?"

He took the remote from Mr. Hunt, inspected it, and handed it back. "I am not sure"

"Good to see you, have a chair. Let me turn this thing off."

They sat in silence for a minute. But soon Mr. Hunt's blood pressure went back up. "The world has gone wild. That's all you see on there. Shri Lahnka, how's that for the name of a country? Then you've got the crazy Catholics and Protestants killing each other off in Northern Ireland, weird music, I mean it's just weird most of the time. This is all I do all day long, prisoners in Vietnam, Nixon in Russia, CIA scandals, get rich quick schemes. There you have it. I sit here and watch this stuff go by. I think this is more serious than watching *I Love Lucy* reruns. This is what a responsible man does, he watches the news. But in what way is this responsible. And it's noisy, and it's violent and I'm bored as hell anyway. Everything seems disconnected from everything else. And especially me. I just am disconnected."

Mr. Hunt was now as tired as he had been excited. "Maybe I should watch *I Love Lucy*."

William Daniel chuckled. "I like *Star Trek* myself. Or *Pete and Gladys*."

William Daniel Bell settled into the grey vinyl armchair and practiced using the remote more than he actually watched the tele-

vision with his old mentor. The person he had come to consult no longer existed.

"I am 90. I am a broken piece of machinery," his mentor sighed. "Who said that? Somebody said that."

Chapter 111: 1972

The most unlikely thing was buzzing on the radio that morning when Huntsville Police Chief McPherson dropped by his son's place. Some left-wing thing. Just how drunk was John anyway?

The Sierra Club's legal action against the Federal government has been thrown out of court. A federal grant for the use of public lands in Sequoia National Forest was to be given to Walt Disney Company for a skiing development.

His miserable son. What the hell was his miserable son going to do when he died? John was still living in that broken-down rental home where he had lived with Lulu the ho. Still in the same worn out leather armchair facing the same 1956 Philco radio listening to baseball games and nasty talk shows and drinking Buds. Right now, it was National Public Radio for some reason. Apparently, his son was so numbed by his bellyful of beers that he didn't even bother to change the channel.

Cans were strewn on the floor. Mac picked them up and threw them out and yelled at John to get a damned mop and clean up the mess.

John said nothing at all. He stood up, ambled into the kitchen and got a smelly mop and a bucket of cold water and slopped it around. He was a 45-year-old man for crap's sake. He didn't have a goddamned job.

"This is the land of sky-blue waters" sang a beer commercial.

"This ain't the land of sky-blue waters. How do you live in this shit?"

John didn't answer the question. Instead he said:

"Heard some Indian complain about that commercial, you know?"

US Supreme Court Justices have delivered their opinion. It had been alleged that the approval of this real estate/commercial development was nothing less than corruption: The Federal government received moneys in exchange for these rights. The court's opinion was that since the Sierra Club could show no individualized harm or injury to itself or to others, it could not sue. In a lyrical dissenting opinion, Justice Douglas stated that the environment, like a ship at sea or a corporation, should be considered a legal person, and lawsuits should of course be brought on its behalf.

Mac snapped the radio off.

For the first time in what seemed like years, his son spoke directly to him.

"The Feds came by to see me yesterday."

"'bout what?"

"'bout you."

PART 4
Kudzu

Chapter 112: 2011

The weightless web

"Silver spindle silken thread, weave for her a weightless web, and mesh, chameleon, with her flesh." Linda Petteway laughed, and added "ooo-^{ooo}-ooo!" as she set the coasters on the coffee table.

"Weave for her a kudzu web." Nellie Maude adjusted her large bum on the sofa.

"What are you on about Linda?" It was Lulu who said it from the kitchen.

"That's just Lindy being spooky." Mary Kobehi Torres set mugs and glasses on the coasters. Even at 61, Naphtali's daughter was as cheerful as she had been at 15. And she still dressed the same: Loose dresses made of West African fabrics, leather thongs, the same well-trimmed Afro with a broad Yacouba hairband holding it in place.

"It's just this all just reminds me of a meeting of a witch's coven in a Shakespeare play." Linda sat down on the sofa and found it wanting. She grabbed a long grey pillow to put behind the small of her back.

"I thought you were a business woman. How do you balance

all this heeby jeeby stuff with real life?" Lulu handed six forks and spoons to Naphtali.

"You get yourself caught up in creepy ideas, you're going to wake up in a mess someday." Naphtali placed the things on the coffee table. "Napkins over there Mary."

"Oh, she's just playing, Mama. She loves being the voodoo girl!" Mary set the pink paper napkins on the table in front of her and twirled them with a glass like a cocktail waitress.

"I'm too old to be moving around like this. Sit me down somewhere!" Naphtali toddled over to the couch and squeezed herself in.

"Well, I'm just naming what I observe. Here we are a secret circle of ladies conspiring…" Linda didn't get to finish that sentence.

"What are you on about, conspiring?" Naphtali opened the tin of shortbread on the table and moved things about.

"Well a group of old women "

"Speak for yourself!" Mary and Lulu chimed at the same time.

"A group of women trying to determine what to do about another woman who is not present, then. Do you prefer the longhand?" Linda adjusted her pillow.

"Who said anything like that?" Mary snitched a shortbread cookie.

"Why are we doing this again?" Dr. Martha Slade, the stable one in her clan, walked to the counter and took the sugar bowl and the creamer and found a place for them on the low Scandinavian buffet.

No one answered her. She sat down in the pearl grey armchair and looked out the sliding glass window. The day was cool and hazy, and the music Lulu had put on was gently winding around her mind.

"What's the music?" she asked.

"*Finding the Murray River.* Coffee, tea or Dr. Pepper. Help yourself. It's an Australian thing." Lulu placed a large tray with pots and bottles on the buffet. "Soothes my soul."

"Bring me some ice, Lulu."

"Go get some for yourself in the freezer Nellie Maude."

Gusts of fine drizzle blew across the turquoise swimming pool in the back yard.

"Your gardener does a fine job," Linda said. "Right next to the woods and not a vine in sight."

"William Daniel trained him well," Lulu said.

She sat down. All the women were silent for a moment, sipping their tea.

Lulu threaded her fingers carefully through her red hair and said:

"Let me tell you about things then," and proceeded to recount a tale.

It was the story of the Bell family. Her voice was musical and so was her story. This little isolated family had witnessed the wildness of capitalism and of the forest. They were twentieth century pioneers. They were mad and practical, uneducated and brilliant. They were people with a plan, but the plan did not work out.

Nellie Maude fell asleep, and Linda elbowed her when she let out a snort.

Lulu continued. As young boys, William Daniel and his baby brother Georgy fought the land, and especially the kudzu, and protected their broken-down mother. They dealt with their father's suicide. She spoke about William Daniel. How he was blessed to find a replacement father in his company president. And then she turned to his private and almost poetic obsession with value, with money, and even more so with gold.

At this point, Naphtali stopped her up short.

"Lulu, are you feeling alright? Who's going to believe you if you talk like that?"

Lulu tapped her red fingernails on the arm of the sofa and looked out into the back yard. She had come back to reality.

"I just need y'all to understand some things, that's all. Before the you-know-what hits the fan."

Naphtali looked into her teacup for a second and then spoke to Lulu.

"Well, if we are going to have a party to talk about Mr. Bell, let's be accurate. *You* are the one who loved sparkles and jewels and Cadillacs. He sure as *hell* was not greedy. He risked his company to hire *me* in 1959. He backed me in the lawsuit *against the police department* over the death of my son James. He paid for the attorney. Not to mention the room and board he had provided Nellie Maude all those years."

"And you think I don't know all that?"

"Well ***what*** are you talking about?"

"Exactly. Maybe be more precise." Martha Slade heard her marriage counselor voice come through loud and clear. She should not have said that. At least like that. She noted that the other women in the room were hanging back, as if worried about what a confrontation between the two oldest women in the room would bring.

"I'm talking, precisely, about a man who kept one hundred thousand dollars in gold bars in one safe in the garage and nearly $400,000 in greenbacks in the other."

Lulu paused a second to see how the women reacted.

"In addition to his company, his real estate holdings, his money in the bank, in the commodities market and in bonds."

Lulu knew they'd heard the rumors. Everyone had heard the rumors of Bell's cash, and especially of his gold ingots, but no one

had ever heard it from the horse's mouth. Maybe Naphtali was in on it. And maybe Nancy Miller — but she was dead now.

"Gimme a napkin Martha." Nellie Maude took it and blew her nose and put the napkin in her pocket.

"I'm talking about a man, my man, who thought out loud about what it would mean to say his house had value, a joke had value, time had value, his own granddaughter had value. And could you put a dollar figure on all of that? And how would you calculate that? That's the way he put it." She waved her hand and blew a frustrated noise. "I'm talking about a man who wondered about these things in private, a lot. A lot. Now y'all didn't know that man, didja?" No one moved. "This is the wonderful man I was blessed to live with for thirty-seven years. This is the man I miss every second of my wasting life. He is that same man."

Silence hung over the room a few seconds.

"You loved him so much. That's unusual, you know? And it's true; we can feel responsible for the Achilles heel of our loved ones," Martha said, careful.

Lulu put her hand to her mouth.

"But forgive me for asking, what does this have to do with Madison and her bags of money?" Martha continued. "I mean, that is what we are here for, right?"

Lulu cleared her throat and after a beat said,

"We'll get there..."

She resumed her story, thinking concretely now. At one point, William Daniel felt it was important to give Nellie Maude a real job. Lulu paused, thinking about the dreadful things the lady across the coffee table had been involved in that had led William Daniel to make such a decision. Over the years, she resumed, she herself had thought about investing some of her own savings in real estate. They decided to do it together. They had both agreed that one day the Twickenham District would be a high market community. They

bought two run-down homes there and put Nellie Maude in one, letting her manage the places. "Which she promptly burnt to the ground."

"I did not!" Nellie Maude protested.

"Phew. Well, come on Lulu, that's not true, you know that." Linda looked into her teacup.

"***She*** did. Or her friends did." Nellie Maude pointed at Linda.

Martha was astonished to see the violence of this exchange. So was Mary apparently. Naphtali shook her old head.

"It was an accident, girl. What are you doin'?" Mary laughed.

"Y'all're right. But you did refuse to get the chimney swept, Nellie Maude," Lulu snapped. "And you did sit on your voluminous behind and do absolutely nothing you were supposed to do to get contractors in to fix up the two houses. By the time we finally moved you out, there were rats in both houses. And then you decided to break in and steal things from the place. And we bailed you out and did not press charges."

Martha noted that the other women kept looking from one old white lady to the other as if to see if things would explode. Nellie Maude apparently didn't know what to say and Lulu let go. At 87, conflict was exhausting.

Whatever the details, Lulu continued, she and William Daniel obviously had to take it out of Nellie Maude's hands and put it into the hands of a real estate management firm. They should have done it earlier, she confessed.

"I really didn't like that responsibility," Nellie Maude said, pulling her Dr. Pepper to her mouth.

Nellie Maude, Lulu went on, moved into a rental while work was being completed on the two houses. And she only moved back for a few months when she nearly got herself evicted from the other place.

"I didn't like those drafty old places. And I didn't get myself evicted." Nellie Maude was speaking to no one in particular.

"Around that time, a couple of kids decided, one in a half-hearted way, to come cure my William Daniel of his obsession with money once and for all."

"Her boyfriends." Nellie Maude pointed at Linda again.

"Really? Your boyfriends? Plural?" Mary seemed to think this was a fun idea.

"No, no. Not. A couple of guys I knew from high school."

"Everyone's heard about most of this, I'm sure," said Lulu.

"I haven't," Mary said.

"But here's the part you haven't heard before. I got the money back, but I just didn't give it to William Daniel."

Mary continued not feeling the impact of this news. "I mean I heard someone had conned him. That's all. Did you know Mama?"

"Yes I knew," Naphtali said. "Or I thought I did. I didn't know exactly who did the conning." She glanced up at Lulu who looked away.

"Did you ***hire*** those kids Lulu?" asked Martha Slade.

The room went silent.

"Wow. No. No, I didn't."

"Now. You know Bertine is in the police department, don't you?" Naphtali said. "You know what that means?"

Lulu said nothing.

"Well, think carefully about what you say to me if you're going to give me new information."

Why were they there, that's what Martha wanted to know. And what were they doing? Were they helping an old woman settle her accounts? Were they rewriting an unsettling history so that she

could let go of it? Women do this sort of thing, she knew. From time immemorial, women fashion the world with their stories. They spin and weave the world. Or they cobble it together like a patchwork quilt. And at the very end of things, they tie off all the threads of memory.

Maybe the real question was what were they not doing there? What was the story they were not telling? And was Lulu dying? She seemed charged with one last great duty as very old people sometimes are. They stay alive to see their great-grandchildren born or they fight not to die before they have the nerve to explain their banking situation to their surviving spouse. Lulu's story and presence today had that sort of power.

Maybe the real question was who are "they"? What about this collection of women, Martha wondered. The hard up, the marginal, the minority… Where were the sort of women who came into her office shaken and half unconscious with worry, the Southern Belles, the Golfing Girls, the Scientists' Wives, the College Professors who did not understand what had gone wrong with their husbands and their own frustrating lives? This town was full of such women. Given Lulu Bell's position in the community, Martha would expect to see her surrounded by people in a certain social circle.

Did Lulu gather the odd bits of humanity around her so that she would feel more solid? Or did she choose what she saw as the exceptional bits? And was she aware of her choices?

Martha was startled to hear Nellie Maude whine something. When she looked at her shaggy old cousin, she could see that this was something that had been building up in her for a lifetime.

"Billy Dan did not take care of my old bones for nothing, y'all know it. He took that cabin from us when he was fourteen, y'all know that."

"Now, Nellie Maude, you were not born at the time," Lulu leveled at Nellie Maude. "And he was 17. And furthermore: the law is the law. The Grants abandoned the land. The Bells improved it. Next: He made you an honest offer and you refused to negotiate.

Finally: he got you and your folks out of deep water in 1931 and again in 1954 if memory serves. Not to mention 1972."

Martha Slade decided to stand in the middle of this fight.

"He did. He did. All the Slades know the story. We dropped our suit in 1929 anyway. Grandpops told me 'bout when they saw him in court. There he was, skinny and clean and 17, sounding like a defense attorney."

Silence hung again in the air, invisible but taking up space, like the ghost of an absent loved one.

"Where is Nancy Miller when you need her?" Mary said. "She would have had something funny to say that would have cut this tension."

"She would have made me laugh or made me mad," Lulu said.

"Ah the phantoms called up in the magic circle!" Linda drawled.

"You should be glad she is not here," Lulu snapped. "She would have taken the top of your head off Linda Petteway, you and your creepy shit. Excuse me."

"You know I can't even imagine what she'd be like at 83. She would be 83 right?" Naphtali wiped her eye.

"Don't cry Mama." Mary tapped her on the back.

"I'm not crying. I'm just old, my eyes are doin their crying all alone."

"She was so sweet and forgetful at the end," Mary said.

"Either you're sweet and forgetful or mean and full of memory," said Lulu

"You know which one you are," Nellie Maude said.

"My mind is full of holes. Full of em. But I remember what I need to."

"Have we done anything about Madison? I mean, if that's what we're here to do," Martha said.

"That's not exactly what we're here to do. Look. Pretty soon, when my Maddie finally settles her mind on the fact that that money came from us, things are going to pop. It's not going to be nice I'm afraid. I just want y'all to know as much as there is to know. So, if she talks to you she'll have a balanced view of things."

"What does that mean?" Nellie Maude asked.

"Why'n't you just tell her?" Martha asked.

"I'm gonna do that before too long. But you never know. I could drop dead before I get the guts."

"I pray you get your chance," Naphtali said. "And that you tell her the stuff you have not told us."

The dishes washed, the photo of William Daniel was wiped dry and the tea towels were hung up. Lulu helped the ladies on with their coats and hats. They were all ready to go when the conversation geared up again.

"You played God with your man Lulu." Naphtali looked straight into Lulu's eyes.

"No, I took care of my man."

"Maybe he needed a lesson," said Nellie Maude.

"Not. It was not about a lesson. He didn't need a lesson," Mary said.

"Nah. He didn't need a lesson." Naphtali was moved.

"He was a kind man," Linda said.

"With a great '*personal'* generosity." Naphtali chuckled at the thought.

"Prodigiously generous, as long as you didn't want him to pay for lunch," Mary said.

"Or buy a new car! You should have seen him when I tried to get him to buy a new Cadillac," Lulu said.

"He needed to relax, it sounds like," Martha said.

"He needed to just open his fists and let go." Mary made the gesture.

"Well he did that. Sort of. Finally," Naphtali said.

"Yes he did. I helped that part along. And now we need to convince Madison to just open her fists and let things go. Just let it go," Lulu said.

"*We* need to?" Martha asked.

"*I* need to. But I have no idea how to do that."

Chapter 113: 1972

Driving by

Sitting at the stop light, McPherson could see the house that William Daniel Bell had evicted him from. He drove by it every day of his life. It gave him lots of opportunities to remember how pissed off he was. He'd kind of snickered when the place got burnt down the previous Halloween. Old moneybags just left it to rot ever since. Ivy, that was ivy not kudzu, ivy started growing up the right side of 605, and the black charred hat of the burnt roof of number 607 Twickenham Station Road had begun to cave in.

As he drove by something was moving inside 607. McPherson rolled down the window of the police car to get a better look. This still felt like his personal property. He heard the rattle of metal and the slam of a cupboard door. That would be coming from the big kitchen downstairs, he thought. He let his car roll silently to a stop, pulled the emergency brake and eased out the door, hand on his gun.

"Hello?" he called through the front door, "That you Mr. Bell?"

There was no response, but the noise continued deep inside the house as he stepped quietly across the threshold.

"Drop all that and place your hands on the wall." He barked at a moving shadow.

"This is my house. Well, I'm the apartment manager!" Nellie Maude Slade whined. She put the stuff down on the floor.

"Sure y'are." He could see her now. She looked like some kind of a vagrant.

"Call Mr. Bell, he'll tell you. I'm just recuperatin' stuff that'll be thrown out."

"Fireplace tools? China? Does this belong to Mr. Bell?"

"Well it's his building."

"Right. Does the telephone work?" He eased over to pick it up and saw it didn't. "Ok, put your hands behind your back ma'am."

Chapter 114: 2011

"Oh, that's just *Dialin' Foh Dollahs.* One day, I'll win." Nellie Maude spoke louder than the TV. "Nothin, just a lot of noise. Don't worry." Nellie Maude held the phone to her ear with her shoulder and poured herself a cup of cold coffee and turned off the television.

"Well it's a rerun. Yeah, they rerun these things. Anyhoo, I thought y'all weren't goina talk to me, you know now that y'all are on the media as they say."

She gave a gentle little kick towards her cats, who seemed to think that because she was up and in the kitchen, it was time to eat. She took a swig of her coffee and with her mouth full said

"Mm hmm. Mm hmm." She swallowed. "Yup, I'm at home right now, just me the kitties and the TV. Well, and Junior."

"Ma dawg."

She moved towards the window. Nellie Maude really didn't like these new phones which seemed to switch on and off in mid-sentence sometimes. She twirled the dirty tea towel hanging from a drawer handle and rolled her eyes because whoever was on the phone was doing a lot of talking.

"So, where's he livin' then?" She kicked at the cat rubbing her leg. "Mm hmm. In Nashville. Yee haw! Professor Trent." She made a dry throated noise that sounded a little like a greedy laugh. "Well, what do you know about that?"

She let go of the towel and leaned on the kitchen counter.

"All I heard was they found it. No, not at the airport. You want me to rustle my old bones around to look into it?" She looked at her finger tips and then rubbed them together as she listened.

"Yeah, we can arrange something. Sure. Yep. Call me back when you're free."

Chapter 115: 1972

Philip looked at himself in the mirror, flipped the black flap of hair out of his eyes and reached for his tweezers. There were dark hairs crawling up the left side of his cheek.

"Kudzu! Out. Out. And Out."

"You're disgusting." Trent was watching him and wincing.

"Not anymore."

The radio was playing syrupy Christmas songs. Trent reached over and turned it off.

"Really. I am cross with you," he said.

"You are ***cross*** with me? Alls balls! Who are you, my great aunt?" Philip started trimming wild hairs from his eyebrows.

"I want no part of this."

"Good God. Don't you get tired of saying that? You don't mean it."

Trent sat on the bed looking at the floor, palms planted on the mattress, feet planted on the floor, not moving a muscle. Philip saw the distress in Trent's body and, and especially the potential for

sudden movement, as if he were about to project himself out of the front door. The dark boy came and stood very close to the pale one.

"Anywhere I go, that's where you go." He pushed Trent's hair off his forehead. "And anything I want, that's what you want." He pulled up Trent's chin to look into his blue eyes. "And that's the way it's always been."

"I'm not going to the restaurant."

"Of course you are. Comb your hair. You look like hell."

Chapter 116: 2011 HPD

Sitting in the conference room waiting for Sergeant Kobehi to come in for her lesson, Detective Eugene Penn again thought about the color of the walls. How did anyone decide on such a color? Was it bought by the ton for all the police stations in the State of Alabama? Was it just what the painter had on hand that rainy day in 1972 when the room was last painted? Bertine Kobehi materialized as if from nowhere. No door opened, no sound was made, but she was there. And she wasn't looking at him. She had cut off her wild braids. Her hair was now tight to the head and curly, and Penn was again surprised by her. As she was pulling her IPad out of her purse, he started talking.

"Ok, affirmative action woman."

"What is the matter with you?"

"Oh come on! Why not? Kind of sounds like a superhero."

Kobehi just looked at him.

"Ok, Sergeant Kobehi, tell me what you learned about interview room techniques at Barber College." Penn screwed up his face to himself. "Was I trying to be funny there?"

Again, she was determined to say nothing at all when he was

being a jerk. She thumped the table with her pen.

"Ok. Georgia Tech, is it? What did you learn about interview room techniques at Georgia Tech?"

"What kind of interview techniques?"

"What do you mean? Oh no, I forgot that you needed to make the list…"

"What is the dependent variable?"

"Umm?"

"What is the puzzle that you are trying to solve?"

"Well it's a big subject. I want to know — we want to know — if Mrs. Slade"

"Who's Mrs. Slade?"

"She's an old lady with a police record who's connected to the Bell-Garth place. We want to know if she buried the moolah in her back yard or whether she had someone else do it."

"That's not a good question. That's two questions. And it assumes there are only two possible answers."

He ignored her. She continued

"How do you expect to find that out?"

"And we want to know who helped her. And we want to know why. And we want to know where they came from. And we want to know who else knew. And we want to know why those two dollar bills were buried instead of being." Eugene Penn was looking at his notebook.

"Invested," she said.

"Used."

"Same thing. But that's a lot of material to be looking for at one go." Bertine tried to get him to look at her.

"Ok. We will be playing good cop bad cop here to get the lay

of the land to begin with. That mean anything to you?" He looked up at her.

"Yeah, it's kind of an informal designation, but I get you."

"You have the easy role here. You be nice to Mrs. Slade, you watch to see if she looks physically ill, you gently remind her that we are not fools from time to time, you're the one who gets up and serves the tea."

"I serve the tea."

"Or coffee or whatever." Eugene did not hear the irony in Bertine's voice.

"Are you kidding?"

"Ok, so then. You ask her questions that are easy to answer and non-threatening. Any time she contradicts previous interviews, you just cite those previous answers and ask her why she said something different before."

"Am I allowed to use my I-Pad?"

"No. I don't want to ask her if she agrees to be recorded, and if that thing is on, her lawyer could suggest that we illegally recorded her interview."

"Ok. Pencil and paper."

"You're writing that down?"

"Duh, Yes..."

"Whatever. Ok. My role is more aggressive, but it's also touchy, because she's so old. So here's the idea: I'll be asking her questions many times. I'll ask and dig, dig, dig and then I'll ask the question again, or again ask a question I asked earlier. A bit more aggressive every time. The idea is to keep her alive, of course, but also to bring her to the point of frustration where the only thing she can do is confess." The phone rang. "Just a sec" Detective Penn said and held the receiver to his chest. "Any time you sense that she is in bad shape, you ask a sweet easy question and then I'll come back

in. We'll truss her up like a Thanksgiving turkey. Get it?"

"Got it. I guess."

"Good. Just follow me, you'll see. Yes." he said to the telephone, "What can I do for you?" His look turned very serious. "We'll be right there."

Chapter 117: 1972

The Versailles Restaurant 1

Naphtali reserved the private dining room at the Versailles for Mr. and Mrs. Bell's meeting with the Millers and the alchemists, as she called them.

William Daniel Bell arrived *entre chien et loup,* when the sun had just set and the sky hung smokey blue above him. He wanted to think: to focus on those faint stars that he sensed were there, those multiplying points of light that could help him understand what to do.

The pink stucco hexagonal restaurant sat back from the road with three rows of parking spots in front of it. The front door was heavy and grey, and covered with a black wrought iron grating. Inside, on the left and the right were deep tufted leatherette booths. In the center, six elegant round tables with pink damask tablecloths and elaborately folded napkins. The chairs were spindly gold painted affairs. Crystal lanterns flickered in the near dark.

At the very back of the restaurant was the curtained entrance to the private dining room, where the men from Fitzsimmons Brothers came to celebrate their business with the owner of the local Dodge Dealership and some hotshots from on down B'ham way. It

was a superfluous secrecy: the restaurant was almost always empty.

Now if the room was arch and graceless, the food was wonderful. The steaks were thick and laced with fat and the chef served them shimmering in butter with a small ramekin of blue cheese crumbles or "*sauce au poivre*" on the plate. No baked potatoes. No French Fries on the menu. If you insisted on potatoes, you got new potatoes with parsley and garlic butter. No steak sauces, no ketchup, no mustard. *Sauce marchand de vin* if you needed something red on your plate. We were in France, you know.

As Bell walked in, the darkness of the restaurant overwhelmed his old eyes. Even five years earlier, his eyes adjusted quickly to the light. Now he had to stand for a minute like an old wolf, waiting for the light to awaken before he stepped out.

Christmas music was playing low. He didn't know which song it was. He felt on edge here, seated in the private dining room with all this stuff glittering in the dark around him. A scotch and soda was set down in front of him almost immediately.

"Would you bring me one of these straight up please?"

The waiter reached to take back the drink he had just delivered.

"No, no. I'll keep this too."

"Is Mrs. Bell arriving right away?"

"In about 15 minutes."

"Gin and tonic with a twist as usual?"

"Probably. Ask her."

He pulled his back up straight, closed his eyes, and drank, feeling the soda fizzle in his mouth. The scotch was only a faint burn on the sides of his tongue.

Now was the time to think. Now was the time to focus, to remind himself of what he knew, and to wait for the faint stars to emerge from his mind. His mother stood before him in his memory, telling him to count all those stars in the night sky.

"Too good to be true is just not true." Mr. Hunt was wagging his finger at him. He was sixteen again, smitten with the Fitzsimmons girl he saw on a run to the post office. She had smiled at him. Mr. Hunt turned out to be right, as usual.

But this machine was not a dream of love or money. It was a breakthrough. Hubert had said it to those kids. And if anyone knew about breakthroughs it was Hubert Mead. But then. He was too dead to confirm it. Bell pulled a paper out of his coat pocket.

Experts were about to show up to answer his questions. Nancy and her husband, Don Miller. Dr. Miller made him wince. Just thinking about him stressed William Daniel out. "Do not let any kind of snob snow you ," Hunt used to say. "Just be present, listen, use your good sense."

He drained off the last of the scotch and soda.

One glass disappeared and the neat whisky arrived. Before drinking this one, he inhaled the spirits. First it burned his nose a little, and then the aromas shifted: he drank, held it on his tongue, honey, oak, clementine, and then the spirit moved up through his palate into his head, and he could feel the lightness, a certain loosening of things.

Lulu was very excited about this idea. She normally was more interested in politics than business. And he normally would not have listened to her enthusiasm. But this time she kept repeating the idea that the ancient alchemists were right. You could transform anything into anything if you had the know-how.

And Hubert. There again he thought of Hubert. If it was a breakthrough, well then...

On the paper, there on the table, he had listed an inventory of industrial uses for silver. First for HH industries, of course, radio. Elsewhere, photography, electroplate for engines, water purification, treatment of wood rot. That one surprised him: he sure could have used it back in that kudzu covered cabin. Once the silver was produced, of course, transformation was going to be costly.

A second shot of whisky arrived. Had he ordered that?

Bell saw a future for himself as president of multiple companies. It was exciting to his edgy alcohol-loosened soul. And Mr. Hunt came to his mind again. Mr. Hunt really had been a father to him, Billy Dan realized then for the first time. Told him about life. *"Life changes in small pulses, neither smoothly nor in huge leaps. You move forward or backward by dealing with your problems or not, not by a stroke of good or bad luck."* He missed Mr. Hunt right now. Mr. Hunt, eleven kilometers away in an old folks' home, Mr. Hunt, both alive and dead at the same time.

Logic would dictate his choices, Bell decided. Logic not sentiment.

In other business deals, he would have looked at the numbers, estimated costs, how long it would take to recuperate those costs, net present value, that sort of thing. But this project was still far too undefined to do any of these calculations.

His calculations for now would have to remain a bit foggy. He looked out across the room and started calculating whether he would want to invest in transformation or just sell the silver to industries that are already in that business. After he'd settled things here, he could ask Naphtali to break down the costs on such a project, get his stock broker Nancy to look into other investors and government subsidies… did she know anything about subsidies? Naphtali probably knew more about DARPA funding than Nancy did.

The whisky worried him. He wondered how long his secret process would remain secret. Yeah of course he'd patent it. In fact, why hadn't Wilson and Smith done that already? They were just kids, selling plans and a machine they had invented.

Bell registered that he was feeling just a little too heady for this meeting. He would ask questions, rather than making direct statements of fact, he thought.

Being self-taught kept a man modest, his ancestor had said. But

right now he was feeling a little more embarrassed than modest.

Oh my God, did he need a lawyer in the room?

To lower a certain feeling of stress in his muscles, Bell started trying to formulate additional questions for Don-the-physicist. This made him thirsty. He took another sip of the straight scotch. It still warmed the back of his gullet.

He wasn't drunk, and he had no intention of getting drunk, but this deal made his mouth feel dry. It was about sinking $300,000 into a project, well… Don Miller would have a look. He knew he should be relieved to have Don Miller at the table, but God and great balls of fire, he wished it were Hubert instead.

He shifted his attention to cool his anxiety.

Nancy would have an idea about the finance. She would be just a little arch at first, he could see it in his mind's eye. That did get on his nerves. Snobbery had hit an emotional raw spot with him all his life. His ancestor's book had taught him not to let it get to him too much.

And that wasn't all there was to her of course. It was the effect strangers had on her. When she felt more at ease, she'd turn confident, curious and gay.

Tonight her wig would be on straight. Most of the time when she was with Don it was on straight. Don did not like to be embarrassed by things like this.

But would anyone make Don behave? Would he play his intellectual predator?

Not drunk, now, but alone: and it had been too long since he was alone. Not drunk, but imagining. Imagining where this might take him. Not drunk, but wondering what his ancestor would think about this deal, with his astounding ways of doing things. When he was going to buy land, he would walk into the woods, squat down, feel the dirt and smell it. The quality of the dirt determined the value of the land.

What was the equivalent? What the hell was the equivalent on this sort of investment? William Daniel's empty glass slipped out of his hand.

Chapter 118: 2011

A merry little Christmas

"Silver bells, silver bells, it's Christmas time in the city." Lulu Bell was warbling along with the radio in her old lady's voice and setting the table for lunch.

"No good explanation for why the person who buried the money never took it back."

"Good Lord Maddie, don't you ever think about anything else?" She straightened the tablecloth and caught up with the song. *"... ring! Soon it will be Christmas day."* Lulu was going to get to this subject today. She just did not want to be rushed into it. "Let's see, will you open the wine dear?"

"And there is still no positive idea of where the money came from."

"I think we have to guess that it came from the thieves who scammed Papa Billy Dan."

There we go, Lulu said to herself, we have broached the subject.

Madison was working on opening the wine. The cork was stuck

in the bottle. She twisted and pulled.

"Be gentle now dear. You don't want to break the cork…"

Madison sat, put the bottle between her knees and carefully twisted and pulled. It wasn't moving enough. She took the corkscrew out and looked carefully down at the bottle. What good was it to keep looking at this thing? She saw that the screw had gone in off-center. If she tried again with a completely new attack, she was going to break that cork to pieces.

"If the cash comes from Papa Billy Dan that just makes everything more complicated…" Madison said, reinserting the corkscrew very slightly to the right.

"Convenient, I would say."

"Convenient? Are you crazy Gran? What are the chances that something like that would happen? My grandpapa gets scammed 40 years ago and I buy the house where the loot is buried? Someone's going to think…"

Lulu felt weak in the gut and started praying. *Oh my God, don't let this spin out of control Lord. Please keep me in the driver's seat on this conversation.* The cork popped. Miraculous intervention, thought Lulu.

"Wow! A clean cork! I thought I'd killed it."

"Toast! Let's have a toast to Christmas past and present!"

Lulu grabbed the opportunity to change the subject and set out the Baccarat wine glasses that Madison loved. Lulu'd bought them the year William Daniel died; something extravagant that she couldn't have dreamed of during all the years of their married life. As if it would console her. She had imagined she would use them at every family meal. But they just made her sad most of the time.

"Cheers!" Madison began.

"To your new life!" Lulu drank deeply.

"What?"

"Drink! To Jacob or whatever his name is.."

"Not my new life. But to Jake, why not. Here you go Jake." And they drank again.

"To my William Daniel. Only thing worthwhile is the right man." Lulu and Madison drank again, and the younger woman put down her glass on the table and ignored what her Gran was suggesting.

"I mean how could that happen? What are the chances? Just think about it."

"Well seriously Madison, it has to be chance. Really, how long and complicated would the scam have to be to keep that money buried in that piece of ground for all that time, people buying and selling the house and you finally purchasing it?"

"Well, we did own my house at one time, didn't we?" Madison was thinking out loud

"We did. And then?"

"And then a couple of real estate partnerships owned it."

Lulu felt her heart move up into her throat. This was moving too fast again. She put one hand on the back of a chair and turned to the buffet. She took out the Baccarat champagne flutes.

"I want you to have these Madison, now while you're young and can appreciate them. We'll use them with dessert and then box them up before you go. The rest of the crystal you will get when I die."

Madison thought about how much work it was for the old woman to have set such a table before them. The china, the silver, the carefully folded hand embroidered napkins, with the complex initials. She'd seen these napkins all her life, at every holiday meal. But right now, looking at them made something go silent in her. The Chinese pictogram-like LJWDB stood out to her. And her heart sank.

"Well thank you Gran. I will cherish them…" her voice trailed off as the thoughts kept grinding through. Could the LJWDB real estate partnership be Gran Lulu and Papa Billy Dan? Why would they do that?

"Let's eat," Gran said.

Let your heart be light

Next year all our troubles will be out of sight

Madison sat and listened to Gran say grace. What the hell would be the point of her and Papa Billy Dan burying those postal bags in her back yard? Did they want to ensure that she would get it? That didn't make any sense at all.

All through the meal, Madison could do nothing but echo the alternately polite and familiar conversation of her old Gran. Lulu saw that Madison was becoming more and more distant, but she wasn't ready to bring her back to the table. That would happen over champagne at the end of the meal. She'd explain it all, get it off her chest and continue her life without all this pain.

Madison's obsessive thoughts ground on. They could have just given the money to her. Anyway, she wasn't even a sparkle in her Daddy's eye when it happened. Maybe they were going to leave it to someone else in the family. That made no sense. They had all this cash, more than that in Papa Billy Dan's damned bank vaults. He was crazy for money, but he wasn't stark raving mad.

"I'm sorry Gran, I'm not feeling very well," she said at one point, not knowing how to make things ok.

This actually did the trick and relaxed the atmosphere for a few minutes. But the thoughts came back. Madison was trying to reason through it again. Once she came along in 1978, well, what? What would ensure that Madison ended up in the house where the money was buried? I mean, clearly as an adult architect this was the house in Huntsville she would want to buy. But who the hell

knew she was going to be an architect? Who knew she wouldn't prefer a brand-new glass house on Monte Sano overlooking the golf course?

You would have to ensure that she would become interested in architecture and would succeed enough to be able to buy the Twickenham property and renovate it. Madison was physically uncomfortable now. Did her grandmother shape her entire life to give her this money?

"Oh my God," she said, looking at her frail grandmother. She couldn't say anything else.

Madison felt sick to her stomach. Gran Lulu had fostered this interest from the time she was nine years old. They'd be walking down the street and Lulu would say "Yuck I don't like that house. I wouldn't want to live there. It's boring," and together they would imagine how to make it better. How many times they had driven by her Twickenham district house in the pink Cadillac and admired it as she was growing up. And every time they passed, she would say: *There is just something perfect about it punkin, don't you think?*

Madison stood up from table holding her stomach. She fought back the nausea.

"I'm sorry Gran" She put her hand to her mouth. "I'm going to be sick. I'd better go."

Chapter 119: 1972

The Versailles Restaurant 2

"Hey you!" Lulu planted a big kiss on Bell's mouth and removed the smudge with a corner of her red lipstick hankie. "Keep you neat and clean." She took her seat in the pink and gold chair next to him. "You smell spiritual! Did you order me a drink?"

"I told them to check with you."

"I never *will* change William Daniel. What's the matter with you? Waiter! Gin tonic twist of *lime*." She drawled. "Please and thank you!"

William Daniel and Lulu were already seated with the two young men from Alchefab when the Millers arrived with Sam Burns in tow. Bell was surprised to see that Dr. Miller had brought reinforcements. He noted that the two boys didn't seem to register that these people were also dinner guests. And he could tell from the look on Miller's lean face that there had been in an argument in the car. What was that about?

Nancy Miller turned and focused on the two young men who had sprung to their feet in front of her. She held out her hand. The

blond one took it and smiled a tight smile. She could feel the hand was rather limp and clammy. The second shook her hand longer, so she took the opportunity to hold onto it with both hands, look into his dark eyes and check his pulse, which was racing.

"I hear all kinds of wonderful things about you gentlemen." Mrs. Miller's wig was on straight, thought William Daniel, but my Lord did it look like a wig.

The two young men looked genuinely surprised as Sam Burns and the Millers sat down at the table with them.

"Ridiculously complicated to transform dirt into anything, much less silver. You need a much simpler substance. The old alchemists thought you could transform lead. Lead wasn't a bad idea actually," Sam Burns said abruptly.

"Sorry, we didn't introduce ourselves," Nancy said. "I'm Nancy Miller, Mr. Bell's financial advisor. This is my husband Don and that's Sam Burns. They work for NASA."

Don shot her a look which said, well, not exactly.

"Theoretically it's possible. No one has done it yet." Sam continued without a blink.

"That's not quite right," Don shot back.

Sitting back in his seat, Bell winced. He felt a sharp pain in his stomach.

"The Soviets said they did it by accident," Philip pushed a flap of black hair out of his eye.

"The Soviets say they do everything." Sam snapped his napkin onto his lap.

"Or else the French say the Soviets do everything," Don picked up. He took out his cigarettes and his lighter.

"And we have done it. In small quantities." The dark kid continued.

Don was apparently having a hard time with his Dunhill. Lulu

took out hers and lit his cigarette.

Trent looked at Philip out of the corner of his eye. They both saw Bell was frowning, but they couldn't tell why. Lulu glanced over at William Daniel. *She* knew why. He was embarrassed for these horrible boys. She looked back up at the Alchefab kids, twirling her cocktail twizzler and felt the anger rise in her chest.

"So, what sort of business are you in?" Miller asked.

The dark one pulled himself together and said

"Manufacturing."

"Of what?" Don pursued.

"Magical machines," Lulu said. She sucked the twist of lime and placed it carefully on a china plate.

Bell looked at Lulu. He had a '*This will not be the way you talk tonight'* look on his face. She smiled a little smile and sat back in her pink chair. It was Dr. Miller who decided to push on.

"No, I want to hear about it. So how does your machine work exactly? Have you got a blueprint with you?"

Trent was relieved that he had left the blueprint in the cloakroom. He hoped no one would notice it on the way out.

"Sorry, no," Trent said. "That was for our next meeting."

The dark one headed into his hocus-pocus explanations. They fell apart in his hands, but he kept on moving forward, explaining things as arcane, contemporary theory. As he spoke, Bell's face greyed, visibly lengthened. He looked down at his hands. He was so deeply embarrassed. And so surprised how angry he felt to see those two boys humiliated.

"What's your plan again? Sorry, I didn't understand that. Have you got a nuclear reactor?" Don leaned forward.

"No!" Philip was expansive. "We have a much simpler project."

"A particle accelerator?" Burns popped a peanut in his mouth.

Trent absolutely knew they were up shit creek without a paddle. He was biting the edges of his tongue. Philip hesitated to respond, but he was going to do it. Sam Burns jumped back in in the nick of time.

"It turns out, you can only get minute amounts of gold even with a particle accelerator," said Burns.

"Silver" Philip said.

"Silver, whatever, but then lead is not your solution," Burns said.

"Minute amounts," Don joined in. "And it will cost you a lot of money. What's your budget?"

"$300,000. From Mr. Bell, if he invests of course." It occurred to Hawkes that he'd better suggest a much larger budget. "And of course, we've got other investors."

"Oh, have you?" Nancy was a little arch again. "Who's on the project? Maybe I know them."

"$300,000? Good God! It'll cost millions! At least," Don brayed.

"How many investors have you got?" asked William Daniel, a bit taken aback.

"Yeah, good question. What is Mr. Bell's stake in this project?" Nancy touched the back of her wig, which made it slip just a bit in the front.

Lulu looked at William Daniel. He seemed as green around the gills as the two boys in their Brooks Brothers' suits. She wondered how this was all going pan out. Were those boys going to take off running through the kitchen throwing pots and utensils behind them to slow their pursuers like in some damned movie? Was William Daniel going to politely signal that it was time for the Bells to go on home? What would it be?

"No this is nonsense Billy Dan. The particle beams alone will cost you $50,000 per hour." Burns said.

"And it'll take, what 50? A 100 hours to produce an ounce of anything? And then there's the equipment. Where do you imagine you are going to get the equipment?" Don was open with his contempt.

"Plans are being made." Philip seemed almost confident.

"Plans are being made…" Nancy raised her eyebrows and smiled a broad smile.

"Mm. Nonsense." Don Miller tapped on the table in front of the blond kid. "Haven't I seen you at the Marshall Flight Center? What's your name again?"

"Nope. Never been there." Trent felt like these were his last words in life.

"I gotta go." Sam Burns stood up. "See you Thursday night? Where are we this week? Don's or yours?"

"It's our place Sam," Don said, standing. "Ok, well, my old buddy Bell, I gotta go too. This is kindergarten stuff. Don't get involved. You young men take care of yourselves. Stay out of trouble, you hear? Come on Nancy."

The visitors hadn't even had time to order a drink.

William Daniel Bell felt extremely sick to his stomach.

Chapter 120: 2011 HPD

The professional distance

Sergeant Bertine Kobehi turned away from the dumpster and vomited.

"That's the first one of those you've seen, huh?" Detective Penn said it very quietly. He was surprised how much compassion he felt for her.

She began to answer.

"Mm." and then vomited again.

"Don't shit up the crime scene!" Clardy whined.

"Would you shut up Ewell? Just tape it off and do your job. Call it in. Get CSI out here. Step away with me here a minute Bertine."

He guided her down the alley way towards Harpers Boulevard, scanning the ground as he walked, and barely touching Bertine's arm.

"Clardy! Boundary 1, here!"

The red and green and blue Christmas lights swung from between the lampposts on Harpers. The wind was light, the rhythm

of the reflected colors against the brick buildings was gentle, but Bertine had to be careful not to look at it or she'd be sick again. Eugene spoke to her quietly.

"Now is this the crime scene Bertine?"

"Yes. No. *A* crime scene, this is *a* crime scene. That lady was murdered somewhere else."

'Right. How do you know it was a murder?"

"Are you kidding?"

"No, I'm not. Okay then, when you see one of these things, even if it does horrible stuff to your gut, you've got to be professional, you've got to do some things. Do you recall what you need to do?"

"Don't touch anything. Protect people."

"And to Protect people?"

"Look, listen and smell."

"Good. What do you see?"

"There's no one around except you, me, Clardy and Mr. Ortega."

"And is Mr. Ortega a witness or a suspect?"

"Witness. Or we don't know yet.

"Ok. What else do you notice?"

"There are Christmas lights up. It has rained. I mean, I see water on the ground. Near the dumpster there was oil mixed in the water on the ground. And just all kinds of normal trash on the ground."

"Tracks?"

"Didn't see any."

"You weren't looking too carefully."

"What do you hear?"

"Nothing. Well, music from the diner." That apparently wasn't

enough for Detective Penn. "*I don't want to go to rehab, I say no no no…* You talking. A dishwasher running in the diner. The sound of the Christmas lights rattling against the building. Clardy knocking around."

"What do you smell?"

"Vomit."

"Ok, and?"

"A corpse. Garbage? Burning oil from hushpuppies. Gasoline."

"Really gasoline?"

"Well, like an old car was driving through. Fumes from a tail pipe."

"This is right. Diesel fumes. Be precise. There is something about engaging the brain that makes you forget the nausea, right?"

"Oh my God."

"Ok, yes, you're ok. We're going to work on this with you." Eugene patted her back. "So take a very deep breath and then blow it out slowly and see if you can tell me what color her dress was."

"Orange. Light orange. With…" she blew out a breath again "blood all down the front."

He looked up and snapped: "Ewell just close the fucking dumpster and call this in! Mr. Ortega, stay right where you are, I'll be there in a minute."

He let Bertine breathe a bit as he scanned the ground with his flashlight. Finally, he spoke to her again.

"Tell me, now, Bertine, what else can you say about this woman's life from what you saw?"

"She wasn't rich, and she wasn't fussy. She almost could be a homeless person. But her shoes were too clean and solid. Did I notice that? How did I notice that?"

"If you keep thinking in these situations, if you keep doing what

you are here to do, you'll be able to keep some distance from all that emotion and you'll notice lots of stuff."

"Thanks Eugene. Thank you, Gene. Thanks Detective. I don't know what to call you." She ran her fingers through her short curls.

"No problem. How old was she in your opinion?"

"80? 85? Someone would do that to an 85-year-old woman?"

"Ok, we'll see pretty soon. And anything else?"

"Well, I know this is weird, but she looked vaguely familiar. And her fingernails were very dirty.

"Well, Bertine Kobehi, Sergeant, that was the lady we were going to interview together, Nellie Maude Slade. You'll have to get your interview practice in some other time."

Chapter 121: 1972

The Versailles Restaurant 3

After Burns and the Millers left, Bell sat looking at his thumbs and the young men shifted in their seats. Everything in this meeting had happened too fast. Was he drunk after all? The entire conversation just slipped between his fingers. Finally, he stood up, pulled back the curtain to the private dining room and smiled tightly in the direction of the young men without looking at them: "I'll be in touch."

As the front door pushed open and the bell tinkled and streetlights flooded the room, the short one hung his head and patted the tall one on the back. The tall one looked over the head of the short one. Was he nodding at his partner or over towards the coat room? Bell couldn't tell.

Something about this situation reminded him of the pandemic of 1918, as if a latent disorder in his life, in all of their lives had been dislodged: a disorder made of money, technical shit, arrogance, humiliation, youth and old age had worked its way out of the fabric of history. And it was as if this plague was letting loose all the demons that he had held in in check his bank vaults throughout his life.

The situation had seemed clearer to the others as they left. Sam strode out with an amazed smile on his face. Don held his head high and walked towards the front door with a relaxed gait. Nancy tipped her head toward her husband and mouthed the words *Thank God.*

When he and Lulu were all alone at the table again, Bell felt nauseous and exhausted. He finished off the trace of scotch in his glass.

"Thank God what?" he said.

"What?" Lulu shot back.

"Well, when she left Nancy Miller whispered 'Thank God' to Don."

"You don't need to wonder what that was about William Daniel."

Bell continued to listen to the thoughts that emerged from that first question. Thank God what Nancy? That Don humiliated a couple of city boys? That I won't be the fool everyone always thought I was anymore? That those kids will be damaged for life? That Don looked like the master of the universe? That you've still got my 300,000 dollars to make commissions off?

Lulu looked at him long and hard. The lines between his eyebrows looked drawn and furious, while the rest of his face seemed suddenly mobile, as if his heart were broken with rage.

Still, he didn't say anything. Bell turned the mini pretzels in his fingers. He didn't have anything to say. His mind had gone blank. Lulu leaned into him and he didn't lean back into her as he usually did. A full minute passed.

"I just don't think that's any way to behave," Bell said.

"Hmm?"

"Why did he need to humiliate them in front of the whole world?"

"Well Good Lord William Daniel, they were trying to steal your money." He was drunk. That was clear.

"They weren't. Maybe they were." He shook his head, and seemed to sink towards the table. "No they weren't. They had their invention whatever it was. Maybe they got it wrong, but they were not trying to steal my money. There was no reason to destroy them like that. Why not just ask your questions and speak to me in private? Why didn't Don do that Lulu Bell?"

"And let them move on to their next prey?"

"They were just a couple of excited kids. You saw them. You said it."

"They were not nearly as slick as their Brooks Brothers suits. Yeah, that's true. They were just practicing on you William Daniel."

"Practicing?" This apparently made William Daniel furious. She continued anyway.

"Practicing. Maybe not the big one, but the little one was practicing darling."

"Do I look like an easy mark? And anyway, all Sam's shit about chemistry. Really. Is he a chemist?" William Daniel's teeth were chattering. "Hubert said it was a breakthrough. Hubert was a chemist."

"Pardon?" Lulu was lost.

Chapter 122: 2011

The Versailles Restaurant 4

Madison slapped her I Phone shut and gave it a push. She watched it spin across the table. She had mused over it awhile and then rejected the idea that the money had been planted in her back yard for her. There was no proof that any of the anonymous real estate partnerships were connected to the Bells.

Was she in denial? No, she said to herself. Not.

Madison Bell-Garth was working on other angles. She had had a look at the real estate transactions. She had calculated the value of that house three ways using three different methods. She could not see how a real estate partnership would have been fool enough to pay as much for a dilapidated building as it had in 1974. Unless they knew what was buried there. But the dates on the newest bills were two years before the date they would have bought the property. Maybe that was irrelevant.

What the hell kind of a game was being played there? And why didn't the greedy guy who put it there just dig up the damned garden and take it away with him? Maybe he was dead.

Maybe Jake was right. Maybe that guy Mr. Trenton was in on the scam. But why did he wait forty years to come back for it? Did he read about it in the papers? But then he'd know that Mrs. Slate didn't live there anymore.

She hadn't heard the door open or close.

"Watcha'up to?" She jumped visibly when her husband spoke. "Mail for you. You planning to go to that *Women in Architecture Conference* in Atlanta?" He ripped open the envelope and handed her the contents. "Why do they do this 'Women in this, women in that' stuff?"

"Well look at this. I've been awarded the New Generation Leadership Award." It almost chased her bleak mood away. She'd been told she was in the running but hadn't given it a thought since.

"Really, can I see it?"

"You can see it when I get it. In Atlanta on the 31st of December 2011." It struck her that she was less and less present at the office and that she showed up for the last board meeting basically unprepared.

"Ah. I'm out of town on the 31st. Did you pick up my shirts?"

Madison didn't have time to answer. Glen kept on with his escaped paper towel roll of questions.

"What's for dinner? Did you notice how the computer cables are sticking out over there? It's dangerous. Why do you leave it like that? Let's have that taken care of. What's for dinner sweetie pie? Where are my sunglasses? I was looking for them today and they're nowhere. I guess I don't need them in the dead of winter. So then, what's for dinner already?"

She was exhausted by the time he paused.

"Do you work for a living?"

"What?"

"So do I. Why don't you go down to "*The Shack*" and get us

some hushpuppies and catfish?"

"Why? You want to go out for dinner?"

"That's not what I said."

"You want to go out for dinner?"

"No. For a change, I'd like you to bring dinner to me and put it on the table, however you can work that out."

"Or we could pop some mac and cheese in the microwave."

"Or else not. Take me to dinner." Madison grabbed her I Phone and threw her jacket on.

"I'm tired," Glen fairly whined.

"I'll drive."

"Where to?"

Madison pulled up on the gravel driveway of the Versailles Restaurant. The pink paint was peeling and there was a green and red light on the other side of the œil-de-boeuf window above the door.

"Is this place still open?" Glen didn't seem too happy.

"Appears to be..."

As they opened the heavy door, mariachi music blasted.

"Good grief. The upholstery hasn't been changed in 30 years." Glen mugged his disapproval.

"Have you ever been here?"

"Sure, 'Huntsville's finest.' The tablecloths are not looking too fresh either. What are we doing here?"

"I want Mexican food and I need to think."

When the second Margarita was served, Madison said, a bit softly.

"It happened here."

"What happened here?"

"This is where Papa Billy Dan got scammed."

Glen ignored her and dipped a tortilla chip into his Margarita.

"He knew it. Or maybe he did," she said.

"Who knew what?"

"And God damn it. God damn it. God damn it, so did she."

"Who's she?"

"Gran. I need to talk to Sam Burns."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I don't know."

Chapter 123: 1972

Loot in a greenish glow

Linda, exhausted, trudged up the stairs from the restaurant. It was one in the morning and the greenish-gold glow from the Christmas lights on West Side Square filled her living room. She stood and stared at the colors for a second and then switched on the lights. Philip and Trent hissed at her to turn them off.

"What are you doing here?" She pitched the question into the middle of the room. No one answered.

"How did you get in here?" She looked directly at Trent.

"Fire escape. Turn off the damned lights!"

She noticed they were wearing green kitchen gloves. Several restaurant sized rolls of tin foil glinted in the corner. A postal bag in the middle of the room was open. A packet of two-dollar bills peaked out. Now she saw two other navy-blue canvas bags and stacks of tin foil wrapped… something. And on her coffee table a silver or metallic bar that looked like it had been dug up from someone's garden. Linda stood back, her hand in her chin and shook her head.

"What in the name of sweet baby Jesus are you doing?"

"Preparing to dispose of the loot for a while," Philip said, relaxed.

"The Loot? What God Damned Loot?" She asked the question one word at a time, very slowly.

Trent stood up, rubbed his head, and walked around in a circle.

"You don't want to know about this, so don't ask questions," Philip snapped.

"This is happening in my house. What am I supposed to do?"

"Go for a walk. Trent, take her for a walk."

"I'm not the god damned dog! Get this out of my house immediately." She yelled this loud enough that, had someone lived next door, they would have heard it through the walls. But no one lived next door.

Trent put his arm around her and said very simply, "Come on, let's get out of here and let him do what he's doing without us."

Linda was dazed and started repeating herself.

"You are kidding me Trent. I need to call the police."

"No no no."

"Trent. I need to call the police."

"No no no."

"Trent. I need to walk across the street to the Police Department."

"Ok. No you don't, Linda." Philip was speaking to her. "Because you've been in this from the beginning. The idea was hatched in your apartment. The prototype came from your private collection of knick-knacks. You helped us figure out with your business school acumen that it was smarter to invite investment in silver right now than in gold. The strategy was yours. The place was yours. In fact, I'm going to be thinking, you masterminded it all."

Linda stood silent, shaking her head for several seconds. Then she grabbed her coat and bag and left, and as she shot a last look at Philip, he mouthed "goodbye" at her. And she and Trent were gone.

Within seconds she had abandoned Trent in the middle of the street and climbed into her car to head for the Tennessee border. Petteway's closed sign would not be turned over until Monday. Too bad. Too bad. She just couldn't be anywhere near this gob-smacking operation. All the way to Nashville she drove in silence. How did she get here? What was she thinking letting that low-life hang out in her apartment?

*

The following morning at 4:30 Trent drove a white rental van up Westside Square. He ground the gears when he shifted into first too quickly. He felt all his blood sink to his feet. He thought to himself, even dressed in his NASA blues with napkins taped over the insignia, no one who saw him would believe he was a delivery boy if he drove like that.

It was unlikely that anyone would look out a window though; only Linda lived in the apartments above the shops these days. The courthouse across the street was empty. And this town woke up very slowly. No garbage trucks this early, no more Twickenham Station bus boys emptying smelly trash into the dumpsters. The owner of Fitzsimmons was snoring away in his antebellum bedroom somewhere and the central police station would have one sleepy officer watching reruns of *Jump Street* at the front desk.

By the time he and Philip had finally maneuvered the bags down the stairs and out the door, two plants had fallen out of their macramé hangers and three water glasses lay broken on the ground.

"Leave them where they are, Trent. She can say she was robbed or something."

"Oh, that's a good idea, get the police in here tomorrow morning collecting fresh evidence." Trent grabbed a dustpan and brush and cleaned up the mess.

He set the plants next to the cash register and thought for a second about leaving a note to apologize.

Philip was hungry as a junkyard dog. They drove to an all-night diner near the Arsenal and stripped off their blues in the van before striding across the parking lot. They ate eggs and grits and read *The Huntsville Times*. For a change, there was no talk and no snide laughter.

When the sun came up, they started watching the clock. The news started blasting on the TV: no news about them yet. How soon before they could see well enough to finish off? At 6:45 they finally decided to drive out to the meadow off I-10 to where they had prepared a hole in the ground to bury the bags. As they approached the lot a half an hour later, they were astonished to see a "Huntsville Real Estate" car and an agent and a family, standing around that hole and gawking. Trent slowed down to look.

"Keep going! Keep going!" Philip was so panicked he didn't even duck his head as they drove by. "Who would buy a piece of shit property close to a freeway like this?" He whispered. "Who the fuck would come here this time of morning?"

"What do we do now?" Trent asked as they drove off.

"Park it at the airport. I need some sleep."

Chapter 124: 2011

The woods, the thickets and the copses pulsed by almost as if she were in a train, thought Madison. These days some people came in groups to this part of the County to hug the trees, to feel the peace, to heal their ills. She felt a bit of that when she was working in her garden in the evening; her flowers and trees pulled her in when she engaged with them. They seemed like faithful friends. It was very odd. Still, the image of the bags buried in her kitchen garden put an end to her bucolic meditations.

The car radio crackled on.

… who were dear to us
Will be near to us once more.

Madison flipped off the radio and adjusted her earplug. She reached out towards the dashboard and tapped her cell.

"Looks like I'm going to be a few minutes late Sam." She spoke loud towards the phone. "There was an accident with a big rig out on I-10. Ice. But all's clear now." She adjusted her earphone.

"I've got a ten o'clock." Sam's voice was a bit raspy on the line.

"Shouldn't be long though."

"Great. No problem."

"Okay then, as soon as I finish with Tim, I'll make time for you. Donna will fix you a Cappuccino on our new machine."

"Thanks Sam. I'll check my e-mails while I wait."

Madison had never visited HH Industries since her granddad died a decade earlier. She drove up into the asphalt driveway and saw immediately how much Sam Burns had changed things. First of all, there *was* a damned driveway. And then those ancient hangars had been replaced with three glass-skinned office buildings. Impersonal, she thought, but clean and functional. Rather a lot of young men and women were out and about looking professional. And you couldn't see the kudzu-infested woods anymore.

Gran Lulu always said that Sam Burns was scared to death when William Daniel offered him the job. Now a 65-year-old CEO, he had settled down, married Linda Petteway and sailed through his life with an unsettling confidence. Linda Petteway, the one-time hippy, had become one of those Huntsville ladies. Except that she was a bit new age around the edges. A tree hugger if ever there was one.

"I didn't really know them well in 1972, Madison. I was just a kid." Sam gestured to a comfortable chair. "We started playing poker together a bit. Billy Dan was very private: he took a long time to know."

"What do you know about the con?"

"That was pulled on him? The magic machine? Well, I was there at a meeting at the Versailles restaurant. A couple of young guys had a crazy scam. Like something out of a Dickens novel. Never did understand why your grandfather was tempted in the first place. Linda thought Lulu pushed him into it. That didn't quite gel with me. But who knows? Anyway, me and Don and Nancy went in and strafed those poor boys. I mean it was all so outrageously naïve. At one point it looked like they were going to take off running through the kitchen."

"And after that meeting?"

"Depending on who was telling the story, it was either astonishing that your granddad would've fallen for it, or a big laugh. People who knew him were more surprised than amused."

"But you didn't really know him."

"I didn't know him very well at all at that point, so I didn't know what to think. I mean the guy I played poker with was risk averse, especially when it came to money. So I don't know. I really knew Don Miller."

"He was a friend of Papa Billy Dan."

"Yeah. That's how I got in on the poker Thursdays. Don and I co-developed some defense contracts. Don was the best mathematician of any physicist I have ever met, but he was sort of an inventor, not at all a practical man, in spite of what he'd have you think. These defense contracts required a real mathematician and a sense of logistics. That was me. We also did some consulting for your Granddad."

"I thought you had known each other for a lot longer."

"No. Late 80's, that's when I really got to know him. In 1992 William Daniel asked me to come in and take over so he could avoid selling HH to a big contractor. He was eighty-one and a bit tired. The US Army Contracting Service Ltd wanted to buy all of his knowledge of sound, radio waves and ultrasound. They wanted to buy his staff, the factory, the cleared land in the Alabama woods, and his future silence. They offered a very large sum of money. He didn't like big contractors. We picked up a couple of interesting defense contracts Miller and me had developed and some others from various startups and we became the big contractor. Miller was offered R&D; he got mad, thought that he should have been offered the top position. God, that doesn't matter does it. What is it you want to know exactly?"

Madison sat back in the armchair and thought for a minute about how direct she really wanted to be. She felt like she had

been going around and around with the same problem for so long, trying to coax the truth out of people who were all keeping secrets. She closed her eyes a second, shook her head and just asked the question.

"Do you think my grandfather was involved in setting up the con? Or that Lulu was?"

"Woah." He scratched the back of his neck and laughed. "Are you serious?"

"Yes. I'm sure they knew a lot more than they said. But I don't know who knew exactly what or why or what they were doing."

"Hmm. What can I tell you that might be useful? I guess at about the same time I became CEO, or a few years later, your granddad learned that the money had been buried in the back yard of the Twickenham house. Old lady Slade called him up and accused Lulu of arranging everything."

"Why didn't you go to the police about it when we found the money?"

"They were dear friends of ours, Madison."

"So, Papa Billy Dan thought that Lulu did put it there?"

"Yeah, well, not so clear. Nellie Maude didn't inspire his confidence."

"He knew it was there anyway?"

"He did. I mean he knew someone said it was there. He didn't tell Lulu he knew."

"Shit."

"Yeah, shit's the word. Your granddad did not want to believe Lulu was guilty of anything."

"Do ***you*** think Gran Lulu had anything to do with it?"

He sighed a deep sigh, but finally he answered.

"I mean yes. But no. Out of character." He waved the idea away

with his hand. “Why would she want to steal money from Billy Dan? She really loved him. But yeah, something. I just don’t know what. “

“That’s the problem, isn’t it? That’s the problem. She loved him to pieces,” Madison frowned.

“Everyone could see it. And then, well, the bad news. William Daniel’s relationship with your gran and everything else apparently fell apart. He was supposed to be active as chairman of the board of HH Industries. He let go of the company completely.”

“And that’s it. That’s all you know, “ she said to him.

“Yeah. That’ s about it.”

*

On the way back out of the woods, Madison didn’t turn the radio on. Her brain buzzed instead with memories of the year Papa Billy Dan died. The kudzu was encroaching from the near woods again. How far away he seemed. He watched from the distance as Lulu bonded with Madison. He seemed to be pleased with their relationship. Today, she would have said it looked to her like he was handing Lulu over to her care.

But for himself, he was no longer engaged with the world. Papa Billy Dan was interested in the big picture at the end, not the details, not how mathematics corresponded to the concrete world, but how the world of men had started reverting to arithmetic and how all of that was slipping away from him.

Chapter 125: 1972

The icy pain began at a single point, it seemed, and then grew, crab-shaped to cover his entire forehead; it seized his temples in its claws, a migraine. Captain McPherson leaned his forehead against the cold metal of his locker. He reached his hand over to the wall and turned out the light, and stayed, forehead to locker, listening to himself breathe. He wished someone would turn off the damned Christmas music. He was alone, thank God, at least for another twenty minutes. Huntsville and its worries and catastrophes were just going to wait.

Sal slipped into the room and seeing that the chief had his head against the locker, cleared his throat.

"What?"

"One of the guys saw someone across the way loading some large bags from Petteway's."

"And?"

"Well, it was four in the morning you know?"

"What the hell would anyone steal from Petteway's? Bean sprouts? Must have been the laundry service. Go away, Sergeant."

His breath rose and fell and he could now feel his pulse beat in his left shoulder. How could that be? He turned slowly and sat on the bench, head in hands. He'd heard the rumor. Sal and the guys had probably heard it too. That bloody Mafioso Harvey Ruffo had said it. Except he knew it wasn't a rumor. Huntsville PD had finally lost the lawsuit against that Negro lady Nappy Patterson or whateveritwas, and worse, he had been identified as the officer in charge of the accident scene where her son died. McPherson had been identified by his own sick son.

By his own sick, lazy, vindictive son. His son who was too scared of him to lift a hand to him. But there he was, taking his lifetime revenge. Mac was sick to his stomach. He pulled the trash-can over towards him. He took it in his fat white hands and threw up into it.

Chapter 126: 1993

What good was a body anyway?

The body was buried. The people were gone. Eugene Penn's mom was relieved to finally be alone in her own kitchen making a pot of coffee for herself. And for Gene if he wanted some. He was messing around with bait in the garage. He hadn't eaten in a couple of days. He seemed angrier than he did sad. But Jana knew how odd grief can be.

She had thrown out all the flowers and cakes. She still had the roast chicken, ham, and macaroni and cheese brought over by her husband's family in the days before the funeral, It reminded her of her disconnection from her own brothers and sisters, who didn't even offer to Sit shiva, who would have been *fucking disturbed* by the stuff crammed in the fridge. She didn't want to sit Shiva with them. Yeah, she was angry too. Pissed off not at Kenneth, but at her own asshole family. These words were not a normal part of the way she spoke. Fucking. Asshole. Even *pissed off* was not part of her. Or it wasn't before anyway.

What must be going through Gene's mind.

Jana recalled the precise moment in 1961 when she had thought everything was actually going to be fine. The moment when it seemed that this hodge podge of an American culture could actually live together. It was at a meeting of the National Committee to Abolish the Poll Tax, when a black woman with a strange name asked exactly the right question of Virginia Foster Durr. And Durr didn't flinch, she just said, "Yes, it is going to be difficult, and here is how it is going to be difficult. But we will find a way to do it."

Now that Kenneth was dead, Jana wasn't sure she believed that future would ever come. She thought it might be lost.

All the people in that meeting must know it too, those who were not yet gone anyway.

That was the past.

The coffee machine dinged. The present was that coffee was ready and Gene was messing with bait in the garage. And she was living in the nothingness of her own dim feelings and in other people's past.

And the people from the funeral were gone. She was relieved that they had not offered to accompany her home. The sister and brother assholes didn't even call. Not even the basic dignity of observing Kenneth's loss.

She pushed open the door to the garage and extended the coffee cup to Gene. He took it and nodded. She almost said "What good is a body anyway?" But he wouldn't have understood.

The body was buried, his body was buried.

What good was the body? Kenneth wasn't in it. His eyes were emptied of light. His hands would no longer calm her shoulders. They made no more music. His mind heard no more sounds. A body was a husk. Useless. Valueless.

What good was the body?

Chapter 127: 2011

Got a body, got a budget Eugene Penn said to himself out loud. *That's ghoulish. That's cynical. And frankly, I don't give a shit.*

He had not met the woman in the bloody orange dress before he first saw her in the dumpster, and his heart did not go out to her. This was unusual for him: generally when he discovered a body, he was invaded by a dread-filled silence. He was moved by his moral duty to honor the person in front of him, the face swollen with fear or surprise, or just death. His job was not just to find out "who did it", but to bring justice and closure to all who had been damaged by this death. And so, he dreaded especially his responsibility to speak to their families. He knew that other lives that would be destroyed in a heartbeat when they learned what there was to learn.

But this woman and what he had learned about her left him cold. She had exactly one family member, and to that family member she was some sort of parasite. And his heart had gone somewhere else that wet afternoon.

He looked across his desk at Bertine and wondered where his tenderness for her had gone. And what had happened to the person he knew 48 hours ago who seemed so intelligent, so real and not a

bit aggressive.

"Collusion in a scheme to defraud her husband." He shook his head.

"Ok, so you are betting on no statute of limitations." Bertine snapped.

"There is no statute of limitations for theft…"

"It wasn't theft. It was her money, their money."

"What?"

"Ok. Did she have a prenuptial contract with Mr. Bell?" Bertine came back very quickly.

"No. Not as far as we can tell."

"Then it was her money, Gene."

"There is no statute of limitations for theft or conversion..."

"... conversion." Bertine tapped her eraser on her desk and looked up at him

"Making someone's money inaccessible to them."

"I know what the word means. But, hmm. He freely gave his money — in fact, their money — away. So was it still his?" She looked over at him. "Maybe *he* was guilty of conversion."

"...where fraud or misleading behavior is involved. You know that." The tone of his own voice bothered him. Was he just very tired of arguing or was he whining?

"From what we know, Mr. Bell was so clearly informed about the situation by experts, it would be very hard to call it fraud."

"You are young, you are smart, you are mathematical, but you don't know the law very damned well."

"Oh come on. Maybe he was the one guilty of conversion. He is the one who gave away their money."

"And, there is no community property in this state. If she de-

prived her husband of some part of the family purse without his knowledge, she is guilty of stealing from him. AND she is guilty of misleading him by colluding with the conmen. AND there goes the statute of limitations."

Bertine put her chin in her hand and sat staring at her grey green desk top. "You'd have to be a very zealous prosecutor to go after an 87-year-old woman for that."

"AND we do have a dead body." He sighed. Why the hell did Bertine care about who they were going to interview? And how did this rooky end up engaging him in debate about his case?

"The body's connected to the con-game?"

"Connected. Most likely," Eugene said.

"But you're not sure. Have you looked into her bank records officer?"

"Detective. Whose?"

"Anyone's. Mrs. Bell's, Gene."

"Detective. Or Eugene. But, I mean, at least be accurate. Yes, in 2000 there was a movement of $264,000 to the account of Madison Bell-Garth." Why did he feel like he was being interrogated?

"So what?" Bertine noted something on her I-Pad.

"That check in this amount of money was deposited in Mrs. Bell-Garth's account."

"And so what? Money passes back and forth between grandmother and granddaughter, legally, taxes paid." Bertine held his eyes a second. "So what?"

"It's a very similar amount of money to what was found in the bags in her back yard, especially when you take taxes into account."

Good grief, he was exhausting!. "It depends on what you mean by a similar amount of money." She picked up her phone to check something "$264,000 from the year 2000 is worth about 64 k 1972 dollars. If you flip it the other way, the 300,000 1972 dollars would

have been worth 1.2+ million 2000 dollars. Not at all the same thing you know?"

"We've been through this before Bertine."

"We have, but apparently you have not understood it. So — I repeat, is there any *evidence* that points to Mrs. Bell being involved in the scam?"

"We've been through this. That's enough. I don't know what's got your goat, but that's enough. We're going in."

"You now think Mrs. Bell was part of the plan?"

He looked across at Bertine, and he couldn't even tell if she was really angry or just intense about this case. He wished he could light a cigarette. What the hell. "I don't know. My Mom used to tell me to use my whole brain whenever I did something I called 'think'." Why was he talking about personal stuff to her? He didn't seem to be able to control himself. "If I'm only using the logical part, I think it's clear that Mrs. Bell defrauded her husband."

"Be careful with the word 'logical'. And also with the word 'defrauded'."

"And maybe she even did it with the intention of passing the money on to someone. But something in that idea is very jittery to me."

"That's because it's false. Mrs. Bell-Garth was not a twinkle in her father's eye, and Lulu and William Daniel Bell didn't even know they would ever be grandparents when all this happened. Lulu Bell and her husband were thick as thieves. It was the love story of the century."

"How do you know that?"

"I just know."

"My God you're exhausting." Detective Penn exhaled the words.

"It's my job."

"Your job as a financial investigator is to be exhausting in your analysis. Your job with me is to relax and follow. Let's go do this like friends. We can get into it all later. Trust me and follow for a bit. "

Chapter 128: 1972

"Just trust me and follow for a bit Mr. Bell. We can get into it all later." Nancy was on the phone and Don was barking at her at the same time.

"Good God! Is he out of his damned mind? I'm calling Corbett as soon as you get off."

Don had family in the FBI and his cousin Corbett was stationed in Huntsville. "Tell Billy Dan to meet us at the Arsenal in one hour."

"I already told him, would you calm down?"

All the way down to the Arsenal, Don was fuming. He just couldn't understand why his withering takedown of those kids had been ignored. It was insane.

"Matt Hoshi will be there too. He lives just couple of minutes away."

"Matt Hoshi? What does Matt Hoshi have to do with this?" Nancy asked.

"Oh, he's very smart," Don said. "Straighten your wig."

When they arrived, Corbett took Don aside immediately.

"I don't need to tell you that this is completely irregular Don. I mean, I can come in and consult with you, chat with you and your friends as your cousin, but the FBI actually can't do anything at all until a judge thinks there is some solid reason to believe the money has crossed state lines."

"In fact, the FBI is not even supposed to be in the room with the intelligence agencies," Hoshi volunteered.

"What intelligence agencies?" Nancy asked.

"None. Zero, Zip," Don said. But that didn't answer her question.

"Theoretically, Mr. Bell needs to get the locals in here, you know, whatshisname McPherson in here," Corbett said.

"Well that's a crappy idea," Don said. "Captain McPherson is a sworn enemy of the Bells, Corbett, and he's a corrupt sonofabitch, so he won't do anything at all." He looked at his cousin in disbelief.

"He's being replaced anyway," Matt interjected.

"How the hell do you know that?" Don asked.

"It's just one of those things I know."

"Are you absolutely sure?" Corbett asked.

"Yep. We are formally in the interregnum. Although McPherson doesn't know it yet."

"Who's in charge?"

"Well, McPherson, sort of. Or…No one?" Matt answered. "This is Alabama politics. It'll take a while, but it will be clear pretty soon."

"So it's a grey area. That's what you are saying Matt?"

"Yes, it's dark grey."

"Ok. I'll talk to Bell. I'll talk to him. I don't know what we can do, but talking is not illegal under the circumstances."

Chapter 129: 2011/1963 HPD

Lulu Bell was in some sort of a good mood. Detective Penn was relieved. He escorted her back to the interview room so she could get a glance of her own picture on the incident board.

"Cont*emp*orary art! Installation art I think they call it." Old Mrs. Bell took a second to see what he wanted her to see. "Well, there's my picture. I do look my age."

In the first minutes in the interview room, Detective Penn did the stuff he was supposed to do and got the Miranda rights docs signed. But he then completely changed his mind about how he wanted to do this interrogation. He chewed on his Freedent gum and looked at the papers in his hands and listened to Lulu Bell. Maybe it was because he needed to chill out a little after the argument with Bertine. Soon, he realized this was the right tactic. He just wanted her to feel free, to say things to him she had not said to anyone in a long while, and she was going with it. In fact, she seemed to be deeply sunk into the year 1963 as she spoke.

"We married in May. It was lovely."

"Mm hmm. I bet it was." Eugene said.

Bertine remained silent, still angry at herself for having spent the previous night thinking about nothing but Eugene Penn. Why couldn't she stop thinking about his face when she got sick at the crime scene? Why did the look, the serious and gentle tone of voice keep running through her mind like some sort of a computer virus? As she listened, the story told by a trembling voice calmed her a bit. The red-haired old lady completely lost in her thoughts about the man she loved was compelling. And confusing. Bertine struggled to focus on the facts.

"You know, the year that William Daniel married me was one long march through the big cities of the south."

"I did not. But if I'd a thought about it, yep, I bet it was," Eugene said.

"That midget of mind and body, George Wallace…"

"Didn't like him," He echoed.

"That midget, well, he did everything he could think of with his teeny-weeny brain to block the fair treatment of black people. He encouraged white trash and KKK members to inflict violence on everyone they could get their hands on. Even on Naphtali's girls."

"Now who's Naphtali again?"

"Why it's Bertine's mama," Lulu said, finally waking up to the presence of Bertine in the room.

"Granny, Mrs. Bell." Bertine said.

"Yes, your Granny. Why Bertine, you have cut off your ebony locks! It's a very perky look. Kind of Audry Hepburn."

"Maybe in a way," Bertine chuckled.

Lulu turned back to look at the greenish wall, and rolled on with her story. "Well, Bertine, your Mama and her sister went to a demonstration in their Easter dresses and high heels one time."

"They did? That wasn't very practical." Penn looked up.

"Who was to know? It's what we wore to events back then. The

B'ham police went after them with a water cannon, which threw them off their high heels and hurt a lot, and then those creeps in the BPD made rude comments about their bodies. Afterwards, the girls dressed more practically in jeans and white tennis shoes."

"I remember my Mama kept a pair of white tennis shoes available at all times. White as the Lord Jesus at the transfiguration. But even so, I'm wondering what all this has to do with the money in Madison's back yard." Bertine said this very gently.

Lulu looked confused for a second. Eugene guessed her blood pressure had just soared.

"Just one moment, Mrs. Bell. Sergeant Kobehi, would you join me outside? Would you like me to send in some tea Mrs. Bell while we're out?"

"Yes, that would be nice. There *is* a chill in here."

Bertine sat down on her desk and Eugene came to speak to her very quietly. He had a new plan.

"I know, I know, I should have told you there's been a change of plan. Rather than treating the crucial questions first, we're going to let her talk, we're going to cast a very broad net to get her to clarify her relationships, and then we will tighten things up."

Eugene was now saying that Bertine needed to make sure that this entire conversation refocused every remark on Lulu's world. She needed to take herself completely out of the picture. Bertine caught a glimpse of the Eugene she had met in the alley, the quietness and the carefulness. *Never box Lulu Bell in* he was saying. The name of the game with this fragile old lady was absolute confidence and trust. He would ask the first hostile question, and she would then know she was free to be more aggressive.

Bertine nodded but said nothing. She tried to remind herself that she found it infuriating to be jerked around by his whims. Did he have a plan or not? Not, she guessed.

"It won't take long to get to the point with her. Just follow, like

when you're dancing. You'll see. Right now, we're going to let her soak in it."

He realized he was standing too close and he backed off. He went outside to smoke a cigarette and Bertine checked her e-mail. Then they returned to the interview room. Mrs. Bell was ready to pick up her dreamy story immediately.

"William Daniel was very busy what with changes in HH industries and all, but in the period leading up to our wedding he took the time once a month to drive with me to wherever we were demonstrating and to join us. In those days, the telephone was for conversing long hours, not for "communicating", because he was in love with me. He just spent the money. It was real expensive you know?"

"He didn't like to spend his money," Bertine stated flatly.

Eugene corrected the mood. "That must have been a wonderful time."

"Wonderful, just wonderful. When we first met, he would call me every evening to find out where we had been that day, what we had accomplished, what little tiny changes we could see in the way people reacted to us. I had never had someone just care about me like that, just think about things with me."

"It's wonderful to have someone think through life with you," Detective Penn said.

"Think through life, yes. We invented life as we went. When I was in town, at lunch time we would trade off: either I would drive to HH Industries with his picnic and we would eat together, or he would drive on home and we'd watch the lunchtime news and have a sandwich. Sometimes he'd have a nap before he went back."

At this point, Lulu seemed to disappear into another world. Bertine had a worried look on her face, and Eugene was wondering how far he would let her go into this memory. Would it really be useful?

"'*Why would you look at that! A TV the size of my handbag*!' I'm making a salad and watching the news as we always did."

Boatsmen! Vacationers! Take your Sony portable on holiday with you! Highest quality, direct view! It's full of transistors!

"*Full of transistors!?*" William Daniel laughed out loud.

"That same evening my president spoke about the shameful state of affairs for colored people. I didn't care if he was having a thing with Marilyn Monroe or whoever, because he was taking care of the most important business, about what ought to be possible. *It ought to be possible for American students of any color"*

to attend any public institution they select without having to be backed up by troops.

Lulu paused a second, surprised. Kennedy's voice was right there in her head just like William Daniel's was sometimes. *It ought to be possible for American consumers of any color…* He was ready to speak again. He was going to say it again. She felt a righteous joy and a righteous anger as he spoke in her head, and her hands trembled. Her hands trembled with the emotion.

to receive equal service in places of public accommodation, such as hotels and restaurants and theaters and retail stores, without being forced to resort to demonstrations in the street, and it ought to be possible for American citizens of any color to register to vote in a free election without interference or fear of reprisal.

Detective Penn decided to take advantage of the strange moment and the rising tension in her voice and her hands to start down his line of questioning.

"You know that that lady you supported all those years, Nylene Slade"

"Nellie Maude."

"Yup, do you know that this Miss Slade was involved in a quote unquote 'prank' manslaughter of a certain Negro Reverend Thomas Lord."

"No I do not. three boys were convicted of that. They did hard labor."

"Yep, but she was in the car with them. One of the three teenagers identified her. She got off, cause the other two kids did not."

"She was a child or somethin'."

"She was a child in mind, perhaps, but in 1961, she was 33 years old," Bertine said. "It was the boys who were children: 15, 16 and 17." Her tone of voice was very flat.

"She could have been their mother, Mrs. Bell," the detective picked up. "How do you square your convictions with your lifelong support of a woman like that?"

Lulu squirmed inside thinking of that sneering unpleasant old woman. She looked at her fingers trembling on the table.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean she was an active racist. Not KKK, cause even they wouldn't have her. You were active in the Civil Rights movement. But you paid her way, you were her retirement pension."

"Her family helped my family in times of great need."

"Her grandparents helped your husband's family," Bertine said. "That's it, isn't it?"

Lulu shook her head.

"But she's not some nice old lady," Eugene continued, "She's the worst of poor white racist trash, Mrs. Bell. And your Mr. William Daniel Bell is dead these 11 years, so her favors to him were paid off."

"But not her favors to me. And anyway, I'm not going to just leave her to die on the street with her dog and her cats."

"Yes, that's what interests us: her favors to you."

"What exactly were her favors to you?" Bertine joined in more gently this time. "They certainly weren't financial. Was she invol-

ved in helping you hide that scam, those bags of money?"

"No, no no. You are completely falling off of your high heels there Bertine. Ask your Mother, Naphtali knows about it."

"My grandmother, Mrs. Bell."

"Your granny knows. Nellie Maude's family took my mother and me in when my Gran was put in a home and her house had to be sold off. It was the depression. People helped each other back then. And that's a debt for life."

"In spite of the fact that vile people like her were blocking your way, were keeping you and like-minded people from doing the right thing," Eugene noted that Bertine had shot him a 'cut the melodrama' look. This irritated him a little, but he picked up the thread in a different tone. "from eliminating racism in Alabama. In spite of her support for the Klan."

"I never allowed myself to think about it. There are certain things you simply cannot allow yourself to think about, don't you agree?"

"If you had thought about it, would you have wanted to do something to stop her?"

"I don't see what you mean Mary."

"Bertine. I'm Bertine. Mary is my mother. Didn't you want to shut Nellie Maude Slade up?"

"Well, no. I would have of course liked her to shut up sometimes. But it is fortunately a free country and foolish people have a right to express themselves."

"Or didn't you want just to be free," Detective Penn continued Bertine's thought, "Free from paying for the keep of vermin white trash like her?"

"Well, I would guess nearly all of the people in this building, Bertine excluded, but me included, come from stock of poor white trash. Do you, Detective?"

Detective Penn and Sergeant Kobehi soon felt like they were spinning their wheels. Lulu Bell was not responding as expected. Did she even know that Nellie Maude was dead? Penn slipped the photo of the body in the dumpster across the table without a word. Lulu's hand went to her throat and then to her mouth. Bertine slid a trashcan across the floor to her, but the old lady did not vomit.

"My Lord and my God. You do *not* think I had anything to do with this?"

"Did you?" Bertine asked.

"No, I did not, Bertine. I cannot believe you would even ask."

"Why is that, Mrs. Bell?" Eugene Penn asked, passing her a glass of water across the table.

She continued to look at Bertine.

"I have been a friend of your grandmother's since your mother was 9 years old. Ask either one of them what they think."

"You were conned out of $300,000 in 1972. The money was buried in what was, at the time, Nellie Maude Slade's back yard."

"It was not her back yard. It was the back yard of an apartment house she had managed."

"Now the money shows up. And so does Ms. Slade's dead body."

"What should we think?" Bertine asked.

"You do agree that the money in your granddaughter's garden was the same cash stolen from your husband in 1972?"

"It could be, I just don't know."

Lulu felt the panic rise in her throat, and the imperious necessity of not letting this information get out until she had the time to explain it to her granddaughter, her only real relative, the only one left who she loved. The two detectives remained silent for what seemed like hours. Detective Penn finally broke the silence.

"The money turned up again, a dead body is in the story, and there is every reason to believe that that dead body had tried to blackmail someone. Like who, if not you?"

"What would I have to lose from such information being exposed? I'm an ancient old lady. I have lots of money and no need for a good reputation. If you put me in prison, you would shorten my suffering days."

The two investigators did not respond.

"Have you spoken to that creep Philip Hawkes? He was one of the conmen. The mastermind I'm going to think. I had nothing to lose from it. But Philip Hawkes, in his high-profile media job did. Nellie Maude may have tried to blackmail him. No one would notice if he killed her. At least, a person might think. Nellie Maude was nothing."

The silence continued.

"And why, detective, have the police not interviewed Philip Hawkes about all these terrible things?"

As they walked Lulu Bell out the door again, it was not she, but Bertine who eyed the incident board. For every photograph – and there were eight – was a triangle with the words *motivation* opportunity* rationalization*.

"Maybe I will put your face up there too!" Eugene whispered to Bertine after Lulu had left.

"What?"

"Well, one of the people we have yet to interview is your Granny, and you see your Granny I know that for a fact."

"I see her but I do not talk about the case."

Eugene looked at her askance, slightly irritated that he knew he could trust her to tell the truth and keep her mouth shut. He still hadn't gotten over being pissed off at her about that book.

Chapter 130: 1972

"Make an appointment to see the boys about the project." Corbett, Don's cousin from the FBI, seemed quite relaxed after he had debriefed the Bells separately and together. Everyone was sitting around the table in the coffee room looking at him, except Bell, who was looking at his thumbs. "We'll wire you up and get some proof. Put 'em away."

"Are you kidding?" Bell asked. "They have high-tailed it out of here. They're gone."

Matt Hoshi spoke up.

"Well, why not call to ask for an appointment to see them. Give it a try. We probably won't be able to use wiretap evidence anyway. In any case, it's just a stalling mechanism. In the meantime, we need to get their bank on the phone, block their accounts."

"How do you find out what their bank is?" Bell asked. "You don't even know their names."

Corbett tapped a cigarette on the desktop and lit it. "We'll figure it out, Mr. Bell. We'll check the airports. Destination tax havens we would guess. Someplace they can move cash."

Bell looked ashen and Lulu rubbed his neck.

"You're right, Mr. Bell, they may well already be gone," Hoshi said. "But they're kids, you said: they've got ties of some sort in this town. They didn't just wander into town at 20 years old dressed in Brooks Brothers' suits and say, randomly, let's con that Bell guy. I think they may still be around. If you can't find them, we'll get our hands on passenger's lists."

"Passengers' lists? Are you crazy? You need an executive order for that," Agent Corbett said.

"We'll get it. It'll take me an hour," Matt said. "Where's the phone? The banking will actually be more complicated. But I can get passenger's lists. Don, you got a picture, didn't you?"

"The damn thing wasn't working. I couldn't even get my cigarette lit with it."

"What are you talking about?" Nancy Miller's head was spinning with a mass of information she couldn't make sense of.

"Oh, it was a little deal I had planned. These things never work like in the James Bond movies."

"Well, you're not exactly James Bond," Matt Hoshi said. "Let's get a description."

"What does all that mean Don?" Nancy looked straight at Don. Then she turned to Hoshi and said "I could describe them. In fact, I could probably draw them."

"Could you?" Don was surprised.

Instead of answering, Nancy asked for a pencil and paper and sketched out a portrait of one and then the other. Bell and Lulu and Matt and Don just watched as Nancy worked.

"Where did you learn to draw like that?" Don asked.

"You really have not been paying attention for a long time." She continued to draw. "I think it's pretty much that. One of them has a real flap of black hair that falls over his left eye. Of course, he

could shave his head or something. And a sort of a long jaw." She adjusted it. "Can't change that. And the other one has a weird thing with his right ear. Like it's a lot lower than the other. Yeah like that. What do you all think, is that about it?"

"That's pretty good," Lulu said.

"That's a great starting point," Corbett said.

"Got a cigarette?" Nancy took one from Lulu, lit it and left the room.

"The Bahamas," Agent Corbett said, moving the drawings around on the table. "An amount of money like that. They could make some nice interest on it."

"Yeah they could. They could make interest on my money. Will I be able to get my interest back?" William Daniel looked dead serious.

"I'm sorry Billy Dan. You probably won't be able to get anything at all back if it's in the Bahamas."

Don couldn't tell who looked more alarmed by this situation, Billy Dan or Lulu. It was she who spoke first.

"We just don't need all that damned cash William Daniel. We got plenty." Lulu rubbed his neck again. "What do we need with all that money? It was just sittin' in a vault anyway. We're fine, just fine without it."

Matt Hoshi thought that was a strange remark. Everybody in the room did, in fact.

Chapter 131: 2011

NBC News Atlanta. Good evening ladies and gentlemen. CNN Atlanta anchor Philip Hawkes is missing under suspicious circumstances. Erika Partridge, the Nightly News host who replaced him, you may recall, announced that Hawkes was under the weather, and had taken leave.

We have now learned that that the news anchor, who is famous in the Southeast for his caustic humor, has been missing for nine days. As he is unmarried and has no living family members, and as it is not illegal for an adult to simply take off and live a new life, the news organization has stated that it was very difficult to instigate a search for his whereabouts.

But things have changed. His jacket and wallet were found by hikers in the Madison County woods on Christmas Eve, in a thicket of kudzu.

Chapter 132: 1972

Wake-up 1

Hawkes was asleep. How the hell could he be asleep. The FBI would be knocking on their door any minute and taking them away in handfuckingcuffs. Trent caught a glimpse of the snoring dark face through the partly-open door to the bedroom. Hawkes looked like a goddamned muskrat. Vermin. And that vermin had been part of his life for ten years. The center of his fucking life, the center of the whirlpool of his fucking life. Of the toilet of his fucking life. He could kill him and get it over with. A kitchen knife, he could feel it in his palm though it wasn't there. His hands wrapped around the phantom wooden handle, slightly sticky, poorly washed. The slit to the throat — he could feel it and hear it — a slit to the throat to end this what? This connection. Sever it. He could almost smell the blood.

He caught sight of his reflection in the bathroom mirror: fuck, he looked like Hawkes. A blond, small-headed Hawkes.

No. New plan. Why the fuck, after wasting his fucking life up to this fucking point, why should he finish it the fuck off? He silently put on his sweatshirt and pulled on his socks. He checked to see

if he had the keys to the van in his pocket. He would walk to the other side of Arsenal and call a taxi. Go to the airport. Pick up the van and take the money back. Nothing illegal had been done yet. He checked to see he had some cash, but especially dimes for the phone.

Trent was feeling better already. He grabbed his coat, picked up his tennis shoes in two fingers and slipped out the door, pulling it silently towards him. Something stirred inside. He bolted sock-footed towards the Arsenal, and just kept running.

Chapter 133: 2011

Who had owned the hole in the ground where that money was buried? For months all Madison's energy had been deployed in making sense of who had owned that hole in the ground. What was Jake talking about?

"What the hell Jacob? That's all I've been doing."

"Yeah, but you've been doing it wrong."

She didn't know what he was talking about. She had used professional services and advice from experts. Not to mention her own significant knowledge of the field and the home.

"Start again. Forget 1972. Forget the chain of title. For all but a minute percentage of the life of that land and that house, there has been no chain of title. Think again. Think outside the box."

"Thanks for the buzzword, Jake."

"You know what I mean. The paths you have headed down are the ones you know. Think differently. Think of it as a story, not as a series of contracts."

She knew about that legal document called the chain of title. She was an architect. She had to. She was used to thinking about homes and about land and about contracts. She was used to think-

ing about how stable the land was, how level, how rocky. She was used to thinking about the structure of the soil, the drainage of the property, the position of the views, where the light would enter the building where cold and damp would accrue. She knew about choosing materials, about mechanical engineering. She knew about structuring a home, making a home correspond to the rituals of life, making it a harmonious mixture of more than one personality, creating volumes that made the unbounded imagination soar or that comforted the anxious one. Some of this she didn't even need to think about anymore. It was inbuilt engineering and legal expertise; it was creative flair.

But what she didn't ever think about was how long people lived in one place. And why they left. It had never troubled her. She designed for individuals, or for couples if you like, who would stay until they left. She did not build homes for generations of families. Not for gene pools.

She expected moving houses to be a logistical issue above all, home purchases to correspond to the bank accounts of the purchasers, to their personal identity, and the way they wanted to live their lives on a day-to-day basis. She had learned to see the esthetic and the practical. And so, Madison Bell-Garth had no resources for imagining how to explain the anomalies in the chain of title on her home in the Twickenham District.

The only way to come to terms with it was hours of hard graft.

Papa Billy Dan had taught her to tie and untie knots. And this was helpful as she studied the problem. Conventional knots were easy, he taught her. There was a system for tying them and a system for untying them. And that was that. But knots that make themselves in nature are another story entirely. You have to go at it with time on your hands. You have to tell yourself you have all the time in the world. *Don't let yourself get nervous about it, just lay out the knots on the table in front of you. Open them up gently and see what you see. Most often it's just a mass of conventional knots that you just loosen up and undo one at a time.*

As she studied the mass of knots, Madison learned a great deal about how human beings become tied to the land and what a visceral deeply knotted connection that was. She learned that leaving was always costly. Ripping up roots, losing some, becoming increasingly less stable.

In the old days, people owned their lovely homes for generations. Even in the 1950's and 1960's, some of the older generation distrusted apartment renters because they were "not stable people."

As she dug into the archives again, and explored all the archives that those archives gave wind of, with and without the help of her Jake, she learned that her own home had been the site of a series of visceral conflicts.

An Irish refugee done well in the paper industry had bought himself a stately home just before the outbreak of the Civil War. He soon added Italianate embellishments to its neo classical façade and cut down the hedges that blocked the view of the street. These two decorative facts had made the newspaper, as they shocked public opinion.

He did not care. This was his land: this land he apparently expected to keep for the duration of his line. However, he was a union supporter and the war killed off his wife and his line and he did not remarry.

In 1865, he made the newspapers again as he celebrated the rebirth of the South, when he planted an oak sapling that to this day grew thick and strong and that stood majestic in front of the property. He had no one to plant it for, no children or grandchildren would climb it or swing on its branches, but he planted it anyway.

In his letters, held by the Huntsville Historical Society, she learned that his cousins had expected him to eventually let go of the place, perhaps move in with them during his dotage. That was far off at first, and the cousins waited politely. Unfortunately for their pocketbooks, Jasper Fitzsimmons did not intend to go live in someone's attic and leave them his fortune.

He held on, old and alone in that home he had fought to buy and renovate as a young immigrant. There was certainly a reason, but history was silent about it.

What county records showed, when you looked at them carefully, was that the development of this home, that is, its interesting design, had been the life's work of the man with no family. In 1870 he extended the porch all across the front of the building. In 1880, he built a gazebo, which you can see in photographs from the beginning of the century, but which had long since fallen apart. In 1890 he had a green Prussian fireplace installed to keep him warm and dry. He held on cantankerous, ill and barely mobile. On July 4, 1895, he stood a flagpole in the front yard, waving not the confederate colors but the union flag. It made the front page of *The Huntsville Times*.

With his ageing bad temper, Jasper continued to alienate his surviving cousins, those bitter relatives. Once he passed away, they didn't even want to try the take the property. They preferred to watch it rot.

His life's work was left awaiting a squatter to keep it from falling to ruin. A squatter named Grant Slade.

Chapter 134: 1972

Wake-up 2

"Trent, make us some coffee." Hawkes's voice was husky and his cheek was still stuck to the pillow. His veins felt grey and drained and his mouth was dry and sticky, but they had to get up and get out. What time was it? He checked his clock. 11:30. Three hours sleep was better than none.

"Trent, make some damned coffee. We gottagetouta here." The words slurred through the spittle.

"You fucking lay-abed. Do you hear me? Make some coffee." It was really fucking cold.

He pulled the blanket around his naked body and emerged into the living room. That's why it was so cold. The fucking front door was open. The phone rang.

Chapter 135: 2011 HPD

Have yourself a merry little Christmas
Make the yuletide gay
Next year all our troubles will be miles away

"The British call this 'Boxing day', because it's the day you put everything back away, goodbye pagan holiday, *auf Wiedersehen* candy canes, *ciao* glass baubles, *à bientôt* boxes and all." Sergeant Kobehi said this to the guys at the front desk as she started taking down the cranberry garlands. "Can we turn off the Christmas music already?" The guys did not get the message. "When the red and green stuff is still up on Boxing Day, even if nothing else has changed, it just looks sad and tired." Everyone in the room seemed to have a hangover except Sergeant Kobehi. "Where are the packages for the decorations?"

"We'll take it down Friday." Clardy was irritable. "Mrs. Bell-Garth is here."

"Ok, ok."

She set the roll of cranberries on a string in front of the desk sergeant, flipped open the counter and went to fetch that lady with

the executive look who would be her latest guinea pig for interview techniques.

As Madison was walked to the interview room, she looked across the open space office to the incident board, just as Bertine had planned. Madison didn't have time to take it all in. She could make out her house, in several periods of its life, some black and whites of people from throughout the history of the house she supposed. Words were scribbled on the white board, brainstorming diagrams, question marks.

"We're going this way Madison." Sergeant Kobehi tugged on her sleeve.

What surprised Madison was, on a completely separate white-board, pictures of herself and Glen – what the hell were they doing up there? And then there were photos of two young men and two older men. One of them was a blasted CNN anchor man, with the word MISSING in red. And then there was a photo of a very dead old woman in a light orange dress. This jarred her. She looked vaguely familiar.

"Has someone been killed?" Madison asked whoever was listening.

"Someone has always been killed," Ewell Clardy snapped in the distance, pleased with himself.

The door closed behind the two women and Detective Penn. They were in a little windowless room with three folding chairs, a table and a TV camera perched on the ceiling in one corner. They settled in as best they could.

*

"You're reading me my Miranda rights?" Madison was sincerely puzzled.

"Do you understand them then?" Sergeant Kobehi asked.

"Yes, I know what my Miranda rights are. I just don't understand the situation."

"We have to do it with everyone Mrs. Bell-Garth. Even witnesses. We never know where things will end up. It's a bit over the top, we know, but that's the law. Would you please read this aloud, line by line and then initial each line and sign at the bottom? Thank you, ma'am," Detective Penn said.

The interview was purportedly about the chain of title on her house. But as the questioning continued, the detective, relaxed and smooth, focused on other things.

"Do you know anything about the relationship between Linda Burns and Trent Benson?" Eugene Penn asked.

"I assume you mean the Linda Petteway Burns who owns Petteway's? And who is Trent Benson then?" Madison worried about the dead woman in the orange dress. "Has somebody been killed?"

Neither Detective Penn nor Sergeant Kobehi answered her question. Kobehi slid a picture of an older man across the table at her. Madison shook her head.

"Don't know him. I think I need to know if somebody has been killed."

"He came by your house two months ago." Sergeant Kobehi responded.

Madison looked at the photo more closely and the look on her face changed.

"That nice old guy." She barely moved when she said it. Goosebumps rose on her arms. This was the guy Jake was worried about, and he had been in her house. "Mr. Trenton, he called himself."

Sergeant Kobehi was ready for the next question, but Detective Penn interrupted her. "Are you cold Mrs. Bell-Garth?"

"No." She was about to learn if Jake was right about this guy. She held tight.

"You sure? You seem a bit caught off guard."

"This was a nice old guy. Worried. He came by my house. Asked for a certain Mrs. Slade. At the time, I thought he meant Mrs. Slate, the woman who apparently owned our place in the early 1970's. According to a newspaper article anyway."

Detective Penn scratched his upper lip. Sergeant Kobehi looked at her in silence.

"You know he's balder than in this picture. Well, I don't know him anyway. And I certainly don't know anything about his relationship with the owner of the tea room."

"What do you mean at the….?" Sergeant Kobehi started to ask.

Detective Penn spoke over Sergeant Kobehi's question.

"Linda Petteway was part of your grandparents' inner circle."

"No she wasn't."

"From 1972 until Mr. Bell's death her husband played cards with them once a week."

"She didn't marry Sam Burns in 1972 did she? I thought it was a lot later. Anyway I wasn't born in 1972, and I was not exactly a part of their poker nights. I don't think I have ever seen her in a social situation. Maybe she was at a new years' party I was at one time. But I don't think I talked to her. Lulu and I sometimes have lunch in her tea room, that's true. So anyway, why would I know anything about her relationship to Mr. Trenton?"

"Mr. Benson," Sergeant Kobehi corrected.

"You know, whatever, but I don't really know her. And I don't know him at all."

"Well," Detective Penn continued, "to come back to what Sergeant Kobehi was asking, what do you mean *at the time* you couldn't imagine him asking for Ms. Slade?"

"I now know that she used to live in my house."

"Now?"

"Yeah, I've done some more research. Nellie Maude Slade that's her full name, well actually it's Nylene Maude, but there you go, she lived in my house rather a lot."

"Go on."

"In 1907, Ms. Slade's Grandpop Grant Slade and his family moved out of their plantation home well, the burned remains of it, to the city. They squatted there in my house until 1917 when they could take legal ownership. Nellie Maude Slade was born there and that's where she spent the early years of her life."

"Mmm Hmm. That was a long time ago," Penn said.

"Well, she did later too."

"Ng-kay." He was holding out for some sort of a punch line.

"Yes, well, the plot thickens…" Madison was ironic. No one laughed. "Yeah I guess that's a lame expression. Anyway, my house was held, uninterrupted, by the daughters of Mr. Grant Slade and their families until 1939, when it was sold to pay off debt."

"Nellie Maude Slade lived there until she was, what, 11, 12? Mrs. Bell-Garth why would that be interesting?"

"Well, if we fast forward a bit, we find out that from rooming houses held by the Arsenal for foreign staff in the 1950's and 60's, my house and the one next to it became apartment buildings in 1965 and were managed, ironically, by Nellie Maude Slade. She had spent her earliest years in this house and so in the 60's she had the troublesome habit of saying that she owned the place. That's why papers from water and power companies muddied up ownership records: they often referred to her as the owner, where there was no mention of her on the chain of title. She was somehow disengaged from the home after it had nearly been burnt down by an explosion in the adjoining house."

"How do you know all this?" Sergeant Kobehi asked.

"Well you two know, or at least Detective Penn knows, I have been working very hard to make sense of things for months. There

was a road block in my mind. It's only recently that a friend helped me clear up some facts."

"What's the name of your friend please?" The Sergeant flipped on her I-Pad.

Madison let out an audible sigh.

"Is this an interrogation?"

"No. We are just trying to figure out what happened with this whole situation," Bertine said. "And you have a piece of the puzzle, but only a piece. Other people have other pieces of the puzzle. Could you tell me his name and address please?"

"Jacob Pierce. He works at *The Huntsville Times*. I, phff, no I don't have his address. I was at his home once, but I followed him there in my car. It's ridiculous but true."

"So what did you learn from him."

"I learned that the person who wrote the article mentioning Mrs. Lee Slate never won a spelling bee in her life."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning Jake thought that there might be a spelling error in the article. I spent some time trying to figure out how Lee Slate could have been the owner of my house, I got totally lost. I didn't register it at the time, but once I thought about it, it took me 2 seconds to see Nellie Maude Slade. For a second, once I saw that, I wondered if she was the anonymous partnership that held the place."

"Why didn't you just ask her?"

"I could have, but I would have had to figure out how to get in touch with her. And I didn't wonder it for that long you know. This is clearly not a person who would set up a corporate partnership like the ones we see on the records."

Detective Penn sipped his water.

"Mrs. Bell-Garth, Nellie Maude Slade was very close to your family from what we understand," Detective Penn said.

"No she's not. She's a vague cousin of my Gran, and she was related to someone who helped my granddad's family a hundred years ago. I have met her once or twice because Papa Billy Dan gave her some financial help over the years. But again, she has not been at family gatherings or parties." After she said that, she sighed and shook her head.

"What's on your mind?"

"I don't know, Detective Penn. Not sure, but it stirs up something."

"So what would Benson be doing coming to see Nellie Maude Slade at your house?"

"Now you've got me. The only thing I can imagine is that he used to know someone who knew her…? Really, no idea."

"Well, we don't know how well he knew her, but we believe he met her right after your grandfather was conned out of that three hundred thousand dollars. You've heard the story"

"That he was conned out of the money. Yes, I have heard that. But he was pretty embarrassed about it, so I'm not sure I ever heard the details from him. Gran Lulu made jokes about the kids who conned him and we laughed a lot about that. That's really all I heard about it."

"Benson was one of the conmen, Mrs. Bell-Garth."

Madison sat up straighter and looked at the two of them. One and then the other. And again.

"And then this guy and Nellie Maude put that money in my garden?"

"That's sort of what it looks like," Sergeant Kobehi said.

"That's too weird."

"We don't know," Detective Penn said

Madison scribbled a fast and ironic caricature of Nellie Maude on the paper in front of her.

"Nellie Maude couldn't think her way out of a paper bag, Detective. At least that's what the family always said."

"Did you know that Lulu lived with her when she was a little girl?"

"No. That's really weird."

"Not that strange. You just said it. They're cousins."

"Distant cousins. Anyway, all the old folks are cousins in Huntsville except — well, you get me. No I never heard that. I have a hard time imagining the Nellie Maude that I've heard about could have thought up anything complicated as a scam though. Or even followed instructions to participate. And especially she couldn't keep her mouth shut."

"We agree with you. And in fact, probably because she couldn't keep some sort of a secret, she is dead." Penn stopped speaking to watch Madison's reaction. It was not terribly shocked or emotional, it was rather confused as if that death had completely garbled the entire story she had been chasing this past year.

"And we also have been wondering how she lived so well after having moving out of the burned down house."

Madison was incredulous at the direction this discussion was taking.

"The house was damaged by the fire, not burnt down." She said.

"Well, it was uninhabitable. Maybe she was involved in insurance fraud" Sergeant Kobehi ventured.

"Are you kidding? That's a crazy idea. I already told you: Papa Billy Dan said she was dim-witted and chaotic. You think she could manage something like that? She got along because the Bell family has always helped her, I know that. Anyway, she doesn't live that well from what I've heard."

"Why do the Bells support her again?"

"What does that mean?"

"We got wind of some sort of mysterious telephone call right after the con."

Ok, thought Madison, *so we are changing subjects every thirty seconds like on those TV shows. What the hell do they think they can trick me into saying? They really think I know something.*

"No idea."

"Well, we have a little more information about that call now." Sergeant Kobehi took out a spreadsheet printout.

Madison Bell-Garth had an extremely serious look on her face. As if something had just fallen together in her memory.

"We have a swarm of facts and impressions that suggest that Lulu Bell perhaps used these boys to steal the money from her husband," Detective Penn concluded.

"And was involved in a murder," Sergeant Kobehi continued.

Madison looked straight at her and said: "No. No. Wrong person. Not that."

"What then, if not that?" Sergeant Kobehi pressed.

Madison exhaled loudly, shook her head and said nothing.

"What then, if not that Mrs. Bell-Garth?" Detective repeated.

She found herself thinking about the Versailles restaurant, with its strange windowless pink walls, its slate pinion roof and the bright Mexican colors flashing off and on out of the oeil the boeuf even in the middle of the day. She turned her pen in her fingers. The Detective watched her do it.

"Watcha thinking?" Sergeant Kobehi asked.

"I don't know what I'm thinking. I'm thinking about the Versailles restaurant in fact."

"Why?"

"I don't know. It just came to mind."

"My remark doesn't inspire you in any way Mrs. Garth?" Penn

asked "The idea she robbed your granddad?" She didn't answer him. "Mrs. Garth?"

"Mrs. Bell-Garth. Oh my God. This inspires me to say *Oh my God*."

"So you would not automatically say 'She would never do anything like that!'?" Penn continued.

"Of course I would. Here you go: No. She wouldn't. This family has always been so weird about money. All of 'em. The only one who wasn't was her." She threw her pen on the table.

Kobehi and Penn exchanged a look.

"Are there any questions, Mrs. Bell-Garth, which you think we should have asked you and that we didn't ask you?" Sergeant Kobehi asked in a clipped voice.

"You could have asked me what I think happened."

"So, what do you think happened?"

Madison was silent for several seconds.

"I just. I just can't tell. It's just, I don't know."

"Sure you know what you think, Madison." Bertine Kobehi was very gentle this time.

"It's just devastating. This has taken so much of my time and I can't make sense of it."

Detective Penn cut off Sergeant Kobehi's desire to pursue this any further with a tap on her knee. She shot him a look.

"Well, I know on television the police lie and manipulate during questioning." Penn was cheerful. "I don't lie. That's my policy. Sergeant Kobehi here doesn't know what the word means. However we probably have manipulated you a little bit. So, don't you worry about all of this. That's our job. What we needed to do today we have done with you, that is ascertain that you were not in collusion with your grandmother. I am relatively confident of that. This case could get much more serious for you and for members of your

family in the coming days. I also need to remind you that what we have said in this room has been said in strict confidence. I will ask you to sign a paper to that effect."

He slid a paper across the table. "Read it and date it and sign it please."

Chapter 136: 1972

Wake-up 3

Philip Hawkes dabbed the shaving cut under his left nostril with a little toilet paper, smashed the washcloth across his face, pulled a towel under his armpits and rolled on some deodorant. As he poured boiling water onto the instant coffee in his NASA mug, he wondered what he would wear. His shirt from the other day was smelly.

And was he really going to go to a meeting with the old fool without Trent?

What the fuck was Trent up to? Had he headed back to Bell's company to do something? To get something he forgot? He was going to be fucking surprised to see Bell at HH Industries this morning. Maybe he should get there good and early and nose around to see where Trent was.

Or maybe Trent wasn't there at all. The idea came to him with an unnatural certainty: maybe he was at the old man's house. Sounded wrong. But the temptation of that unnatural certainty returned. Why not just check it out at the time when Old Mrs. Makeup and Mr. Old-Fool were supposed to be meeting them at the office? Who

could be there? A fucking housekeeper? What was the harm?

Chapter 137: 2011/1972

The wrong kind of dirt

Madison stepped out on West Side square and looked from the Commissariat across to Petteway's. She wasn't going to go there as she had initially planned. And she wasn't going to go home and look out her kitchen window to the garden. Maybe the Ol' Bavaria. Maybe a beer and a Wienerschnitzle and a call to Jake. Or a beer and a beer and a beer.

What had shaken loose like the dirt from her ruffled garden gloves during the police interview was not anything that would have been of use to HPD. It was a story that Gran Lulu had told her several years ago.

After he died, Madison, I had such a hard time sleeping. When he was there, he just slowed my heartbeat and made my eyes heavy and I slept straight through. It meant he had to wake me up to make love sometimes, but that was alright. That was all right. He would sort of wind himself about me and speak low in my ear and mostly it would make me laugh a sleepy laugh and roll over to meet him.

The night before he called Nancy Miller to say he shouldn't have given the kids the money, we went to bed, I fell asleep, and after what seemed like a long time, woke up to William Daniel wrapped around me whispering in my ear, still smelling a little of scotch.

"The wrong kind of dirt."

I laughed a bit puzzled, because "talking dirty" was not William Daniel's way nor mine.

"Whut are you on about?"

"It was the wrong kind of dirt on those silver bars, I could see it. I wonder if it was even Alabama dirt. Not the same color as the dirt that went in the machine."

"You know I was thinking something like that too," I yawned. "Well not exactly, but I thought if the machine turned dirt into silver, why was there any dirt on the silver bars at all?"

"Yeah, that too."

"And how'd they get to be bars?"

"Oh my God Lulu what a stupid fool."

William Daniel got up immediately, showered, dressed, put on the coffee and I joined him in the kitchen. We had a little breakfast, and he asked me where our address book was.

"Over there."

He picked up the phone. And I was pretty surprised.

"Who are you calling at 6:15 a.m. on Christmas eve morning? Santa Claus?"

"Nancy Miller." He didn't look up from what he was doing.

"Well good grief William Daniel, you will wake her up."

"No, she gets up at five every morning."

"Well then you will wake up her family."

He motioned to me to hush: the phone was ringing.

"Nancy. I think I have made a big mistake."

Whatever she said was brief.

"Yes I gave them the cash. Could you meet me at the Twickenham police station in half an hour?"

I was of course relieved he had decided to do this. Not so much because of the money – although it was a big god dammed chunk – but because I didn't like being had.

"Yeah okay. Okay. Yeah that's better." He hung up the phone. "Get dressed quick Lulu, we have to be at the Redstone Arsenal entrance in 45 minutes."

I didn't even have time to put on my face. Which for once didn't really matter, because when we got there no one was looking at me.

So, there we were, Madison, inside this white room at the arsenal with tape recorders and a filming camera and a two-way mirror. Some of the time with Nancy, Don and two or three investigators. Some of the time we were split up in groups and pairs and it went on all morning long trying to remember everything we could remember about these kids and what they said and what they looked like and what they sounded like. The one guy just shook his head and looked at Don when he saw the Alchefab card. Don shook his head back, like he was saying "Don't ask me how anyone could be such a fool." William Daniel looked ashamed, but I was angry as a copperhead. How dare they judge us? Were we guilty of something?

Anyway when we got on out of there, William Daniel said to me,

"That, my love, was the Central Intelligence Agency."

"Well they must be very central, because they didn't look all that intelligent to me."

He laughed and patted me on the back as we walked away.

After he died, my body missed him something awful. That pat on the back and that laugh would come back to me as I lay in bed at

night. I was like a lamp plugged into a wall socket. Something just buzzed through my veins and nerves and joints and kept me staring dry-eyed at the ceiling. And I was cold. So cold. So I piled on quilts. No matter how many sheep I counted, no matter how many prayers I prayed, I was awake. No matter how many quilts I piled on I was cold. Eventually the doctor gave me some pills and I settled down a bit. But those first months, probably that first year I would not sleep a wink until morning, and when I woke up after my two-hour dive into unconsciousness I would be wound in piles of covers, still half dreaming it was his body wound around me, but it wasn't.

Right now, that soft story was encased in other hardening impressions. Madison knocked back her third beer, furious that Lulu could just wrap a story around her like that and take her in.

Chapter 138: 1972

Sloppy with your money

"Well, don't you worry about it one bit, young man."

Lulu's hair had just been done, Marilyn Monroe curly and platinum blond. She had taken her earring off to answer the phone and now was holding it in place on the kitchen counter, looking at it between her coral fingernails, as if she were particularly satisfied.

"Who's that?" William Daniel was clearly just passing through the room, BBQ tools in hand.

"I don't need that money. Three big ones? Well that'll just teach me to be sloppy with my cash won't it?"

"You are being sloppy with your money?"

"Who's that?"

Lulu put her coral-nailed hand over the phone.

"The hairdresser dear. He took too much from me."

William Daniel, still in a state of shock from this morning's discussions with law enforcement just shook his head and went out the sliding glass doors. He put the BBQ tools on the patio table and

started cleaning the leaves out of the gutters. Lulu kept her eyes on him.

"Mm hmm. Well, why don't you just take the keys to that very van to Nellie Maude Slade? Yes. S L A D like dog E. 607 Twickenham Station Road. It's an old grey place. You know the place? You burnt it down? Yeah, I'll be darned, that'll be the one. That rickety one. Used to be a beauty. You know someone who lived there? Well there you go; you'll be able to find it. Make sure you give it to the right Slade. Nellie Maude. No one else, you hear me?"

The person on the other end of the phone was talking rather a lot. Lulu caressed her earring and kept her eye on the patio. William Daniel waved to her to open the screen door, which she did.

"Telephones are for communicating, not for conversations."

"Well now I never did hear you say such a thing William Daniel…" She winked at him and made a gesture to say the person was talking and talking. "No, no, not you young man. She closed the door, stepped inside and turned her back to the patio. You, young man, are a good boy, and don't you forget it. Ever. Drop off the key to the van and skedaddle while you can. Pray God forgives you and watch who y'all hang out with from now on." He was talking again. "No no. Shush. I don't even know your real name and I don't want to know it, do you hear? Just do it. I gotta go. Skedaddle."

Chapter 139: 2011

Sloppy with your life

"Well, don't you worry about it one bit, young man."

That Southern lady's voice still rang clear in Trent's head. As if he could solve this one problem, correct this youthful error and go on his way to be the person his father had meant him to be. Or his mother had meant him to be. Or Linda Petteway thought he was.

He didn't even remember his mother's and father's faces. Glimpses of her hair all done up for their New Year's parties. Yes that. He remembered that. How beautiful his mother had been in 1965, her brown silk suit with the mink collar. You look like a blond Jackie Kennedy, his dad had said. And then, her distant tenderness for him at the table when he didn't know which fork to use, that he remembered too. And his Dad, wealthy and upright was possible he used to say. It's not illegal to make money if you do well with your life, if you follow the damned rules.

But all these were rules for a life he had never participated in. Even after he had disengaged himself from Hawkes, after he went back to school, did well, got tenure, married and divorced, went to New Year's parties and knew which fork to use.

He did not participate in that life either. He had disengaged

himself from Hawkes, but not from the corruption he had been part of, not from the blood he had nearly spilt. This junk held on to him, wound around his ankles and pulled on him all the time. Earlier this year, in town for a conference at UA, he had even dropped by that old house in the Twickenham district. He regretted it immediately.

But even as he drove back home to Nashville through the small towns and the kudzu-choked woods, praying for forgiveness, Trent felt his mouth water at the idea of, the satisfaction of, the memory of his fantasy: slitting the throat of that fucking muskrat who had ruined his life.

He could handle this desire: he had done it before. He knew this was part of his salvation, to constantly cut away at the tender shoots of evil. He had to do it, or the kudzu would take over everything. When he was younger and more energetic, he would stop whatever he was doing when he felt it creep in. Close the door to his university office, cancel office hours and get down on his knees and try to pull the kudzu out by the roots.

That Southern lady all those years ago had said to watch out who he hung around with. So, he did. He kept company with people who had no idea who he was and what crimes he had almost committed. Even when he married, he didn't share these secrets.

Once, with his new wife, he went to a pool parlor in a nice part of Nashville. It was the thing for yuppies to play pocket billiards at the time. He focused down the length of the cue at a shot, and saw a tough-looking guy at the bar staring right at him. This guy knows who I really am, he thought, and scratched: the cue ball banked twice before tooling into a pocket.

"Try again!" said his wife. "It doesn't matter. This isn't a tournament!"

So he did, and shot two balls in at once. He went down for the next shot.

"Do you want to play some 9 ball?" The voice behind him was relaxed and friendly and a twenty-dollar bill was placed on the table.

"Don't talk while people are shooting," Trent said and stood up, put down the cue and looked at his wife. "Let's go. Time to go."

She was very surprised, and so was he. He was surprised how relieved he felt to have been seen by someone. And how disconcerted. They left immediately.

But no more. He was a secret no more. Hawkes had called. Old Mrs. Slade knew something and was selling the information. That muskrat had paid someone to fucking off her. The hatred for Hawkes, and more than that, taste for blood was back in Dr. Benson's mouth. He wasn't going to do this forever.

Chapter 140: 2011

The end of the festivities

Naphtali stopped in her tracks when Bertine told her what they found in the dumpster. She said nothing and then after a second continued walking.

The old woman turned her stiff neck to look up towards the second-floor balcony of the house across from Madison's. It kind of looked like Christmas decorations and it kind of looked like dragons, long graceful red dragons with gold manes and green beards.

"Bertine, now do you see what I see?"

"The dragons? That's Qin Yun's house Granny. They put it up at Christmas and take it down at the end of Chinese new year. Kind of a combo dinner for festivities."

"They've got little tiny orange decorations on their tree. Everyone has forgotten the colors of Christmas."

"It's a kumquat tree."

"Y'all know baby that yours is the prob'ly last generation to live this."

"The invasion of Chinese Christmas decorations?"

"No. This; the rest of this; the lights; the festivities."

"No one knows the day or the hour, Granny."

"I'm not talkin about Christ's Coming Bertine. You hear me do that sort of thing? You are the one who talks too much about it."

"I talk too much about it?"

"Yes, you do. Ever since you came back to church you have been burning with the Lord, and acting like no one but you, little Bertine, knew the story. Y'all talk like you are the only one had a living relationship to Him. It's intrusive and disrespectful of others' walk with God."

"Wow."

"That's said."

Bertine had taken her Grandmother out there for a sweet slow walk in order to have a look at the houses that the HPD was so curious about. She hadn't expected to talk, but to think. About where the money was found, where the pumpkins fell out the windows on Halloween. Bertine was hoping this very slow walk on familiar territory would remind her of something, would shake something loose. And it did, but not anything useful for the investigation. It made her aware that you could see Temple B'nai Sholom over the tops of the houses. And the image of balding Eugene flashed across her mind.

"Not useful," she said out loud. Her granny looked over, puzzled at the remark. "So what are we talking about then Granny?" She took out her I-Phone and turned it on.

"This planet is toast, as someone on the television once said."

"What? Just a second." Bertine stepped back towards the curb and took a very quick series of photos of the house next to Madison's.

"You and yours are going to have a very very hard time in the

future. With water. With food. With hurricanes."

"Well, Alabama and hurricanes, you know? I'm sorry Granny um." Bertine looked back at her grandmother, surprised by the seriousness in her eyes.

"I'm not going to be around to see it. People won't completely die off. But most of the animals you know will. You'll have to show your babies pictures of giraffes and tigers and lions in old books." Naphtali had to stop in her tracks because of the pain in her stomach. "If there are any old books."

The pain stopped her again, like a needle threading from her lower gut to her esophagus. She felt out of breath. She just looked at her granddaughter, who for once in her life seemed less curious than vulnerable. Bertine tied her blue and white polar bear scarf tighter around her neck. It was cold today.

"It won't be pretty and it won't be science fiction. Not unless your generation does something big, and very quickly. You need to wake up and toughen up sweetie. You need a good friend in your life, you know? Like I did. More than I did."

It used to be that Bertine imagined the Rapture would carry her and the polar bears and her loved ones up and away from this polluted and violent earth before things got too nasty. Then her Pastor told her that "The Rapture" was an idea invented from whole cloth in the 19th Century. That left her stuck in this declining world as chaos emerged before her eyes.

"So, it's the end of the world even before it's the end of the Civil War, Granny."

They stopped and faced each other. Naphtali Peterson put one hand on a fence to hold steady.

"I am not making cocktail party conversation Bertine. Don't be superficial." She looked away for a second and then back. "Spoke to Mrs. Bell and Mrs. Slade …"

"She's dead."

"Well let me finish my sentence. Spoke to Mrs. Martha Slade last Wednesday. All they did was talk about that money that Madison found on her property."

"Yes."

"And I need to talk to you now."

"Please, Granny, don't talk about this case to anyone at all. Not even to me."

"I really do need to talk to you."

"You're going to cause you and me problems. Just wait. We'll call you if we need you."

Something settled in Naphtali's look. Something she had been carrying had grown lighter, and maybe not so much because the responsibility was gone, but because the time for taking care of it had slipped past her.

"I won't then. I won't even talk to you about it."

Chapter 141: 1972 HPD

"Got sumptn for ya'." Bell spoke to the desk sergeant without waiting for him to look up

"What."

"Got sumptn for ya'. Out here in the back of my truck."

Bell walked straight back out the door of the police station without looking to see if the desk sergeant was following him. Sergeant Dills shook his head, dropped his donut on the desk and wiped his hand on a stray napkin.

When he arrived out in front of the pickup truck, he was still licking sugar out of his mustache. In the back of the truck lay Philip Hawkes tied up and red in the face like a monstrous prawn, struggling to get out of his bonds. He was gagged.

"What the hell is this?"

"I hogtied him."

"How'd you do that?"

"Hit him upside the head with a shovel and hogtied him. Well, my son Spencer held him down while I hogtied him. But he's a

little slip of a thing, so there wasn't much to it. Spence helped me get him in the truck."

"Who'd a thought a man your age."

"I have not forgotten how to tie the right knot. Only got one though. Don't know where the other is."

"Why the hell'd you do that?"

"We had an appointment and he didn't show up."

"Whut?"

"Citizen's arrest."

"For not showing up to an appointment?"

"No for fraud, theft and breaking and entering."

The desk sergeant shook his head but said nothing.

"I came back after he didn't show up and found him trying to break into my bank vaults."

"Your bank vaults?"

"Well, he was rifling around my garage anyway."

McPherson walked out of the station.

"I heard you had Mr. Bell out here."

"Yessir," Dills said.

"Okay, what have we got?"

"Uh, now sir, Mr. Bell said this gentleman missed an appointment and then broke into Mr. Bell's bank vault so he hogtied him and brought him down here to us."

"Well, there's some other stuff too," Bell said. "Agent Corbett Miller will be callin' on you."

"Now don't bite, boy." Philip was foaming at the mouth angry as the Police chief pulled off the gag.

"I want my lawyer. This guy kidnapped me. I was walking

down the street and he kidnapped me."

"Pretty strange to kidnap you and take you in to the police station. Come on in y'all. Let's have a talk."

It was a short week after the devastating events. A lot had happened: that meeting at the Arsenal, a second meeting at HHI that had actually not taken place. Tucked into corners of the logistics department were FBI agents and strapping young Spencer and Oran for a very long, very boring hour. All these reassuring guys and a few others hid among the packing equipment until they decided the Nashville con-boys were not going to show up. William Daniel and the twins went on back to the house. There they caught the little muskrat- faced dark kid pushing things around in the garage.

Chapter 142: 1999-2000

Ambling back to the poker table from the kitchen, Edwin Reese steadied two cups of eggnog in his hands. He looked out over the dining room table where most of the women were gathered. There was something horrific about the card that Linda Petteway had just thrown on the table. The colors, the grey of cinderblocks tumbling, the giant hailstones, the black of the sky, the falling broken human bodies, the burnt-up trees and blood-red rivers, the shame of those left wandering on the face of the earth. It was dreadful.

He negotiated his way past the four women without spilling a drop.

"The Apocalypse," Lulu said. "That's what it looks like. Wow."

"Well, it is a moment when things are tumbling down around your head, that's for sure. That's what's behind you." Linda smiled a little tensely, Nancy noticed.

"So, start again." Lulu set her hand on the card in the middle of everything.

"Well, we haven't made it all the way through the reading yet." Linda just did not want to go back.

"Start again."

"Ok." Linda put the tip of her finger back on the center cards. "The queen of hearts, that's you. Betrayal, that's what covers you." She felt herself let out a quiet sigh.

"Does that mean someone is betraying me?"

"No, it means some sort of betrayal is happening." Linda looked towards Sam but he did not look back.

What the hell was making Linda uncomfortable, Nancy wondered. She picked up the four old girls' eggnog cups to fill them up in the kitchen. She continued to listen.

"Maybe you are doing it, maybe someone else is. Maybe both." Linda really wanted to get past this part.

"What does it mean to say it covers you?" Naphtali asked.

"I don't really know," Nancy said, as she wiped the sticky rings off the table.

"You're not supposed to know," Naphtali said. "I'm asking Linda."

"It means it's the atmosphere in which you are living right now, right Sam?" Linda called out.

"It's something that both suffocates and protects you," Sam responded from the other end of the room.

"Good God," Lulu said.

"Why didn't I get any eggnog?" Sam called to no one in particular.

"I made a ton of it. You didn't get any at all?" Nancy was surprised.

"Well I got some a half an hour ago."

"Sam, go get it yourself." Linda said. "You know where it is."

"And this one again?" Lulu pointed to the apocalypse card.

"That's what's behind you. That time is finished. And it doesn't look like fun."

Linda's tone was graver than it had to be, Nancy thought. This was a damned party game.

"Ok girls, let me get them their eggnog." Nancy headed back to the kitchen.

Eggnog was the drink of choice in Nancy Miller's house for every party given between Halloween and Epiphany. She didn't drink it. She drank apple cider. No, it wasn't traditional to serve it at a New Year's party, at least not if you were rigorous about protocol, but everyone always raved about it and it was cheaper than anything but the rattiest champagne .

"Who would like an éclair? I've got pistachio or chocolate," Nancy called.

"Pistachio for me!" Lulu said, stacking the tarot cards back up.

"What are you doing?" Linda asked

Lulu took the éclair and looked long and hard at Linda.

"We shouldn't be doing this," Lulu said quietly.

"This is not exactly the beginning of the new Millennium." Twenty-one-year-old Madison was eager to announce this.

"Pardon me?" Linda asked.

"What?" Nancy asked whoever was going to answer.

"You know what she means," Naphtali said.

"We are playing with forces we ***do*** not understand. Just put them away Linda."

Linda felt deeply relieved to stop this reading: it was reminding her of how treacherous her very presence in this house was. About how she was part of the Apocalypse in Lulu's life, when those two creepy boys used her place above Petteway's to stage their scam.

"Oh, come on Lulu, this is all bullshit… you know that." Don

was a bit tipsy. “Turn the computer screen this way Oran!”

In the living room, Madison and all the men were playing poker and keeping one eye on the Gateway Computer with its dancing swirls of color. It was not exactly the beginning of the new Millennium as Madison said, but a year to turn on your computer, open up your calendar software, and wait to see if everything crashed at the stroke of midnight.

Linda checked her cards, shuffled them and wrapped them in their silk handkerchief and tucked them into her purse.

“Have you ever known anything before it happened?” She asked Lulu.

“Well, vaguely I suppose. I saw this one” she pointed to Bell “when I was about 15 years old and he was about 30. It was in the Old Lyric Theater before I got my mom fired there. I saw him and I knew. Something about him. Something about our future. As a sort of intense blast of information I couldn’t make sense of. Ten years ago, I would have said that I knew he was the one. But it wasn’t exactly that, it wasn’t exactly love, it was like a, I don’t know how to say it, it was like an unreadable wall of fact about us.”

“I have known things before they happened,” Sam said. “Or simultaneously when they happened at a great distance.”

“What do you think that is?” Nancy asked.

“That’s the Holy Spirit, honey.” Lulu swirled her little finger in the eggnog and tasted it again. “Oo Ooh this is good! But I wonder how it is going to interact with my meds. I better be careful.” She pushed the eggnog away.

“The Holy Spirit,” Sam repeated, more than a little skeptical.

“Or something you ***do*** not want to be familiar with,” Lulu said.

“The cat’s out of the bag, Lulu!” Don called from across the room. “Physicists at the Stanford Research Institute have been studying ESP for thirty years. Thar ain’t no devil missy and thar ain’t no holy spirit. Just spooky action at a distance.”

Madison's ears perked up. Lulu and William Daniel shook their heads.

"Now, Don, in what way is the explanation 'spooky action at a distance' superior?" Bell asked.

"Superior to what?

"To God, the Holy Spirit and the angels, fallen or not. As an explanation for the unseen real?"

Don completely ignored Bell's question, because he relished the idea of recounting the tale.

"Most of this came out in 1995. Clinton declassified the file, so I can tell you about it. I was sittin' in a hotel room in 1973 the night that Wallace got shot. Got a call from a French guy I used to know, said the Russians were spending a lot of money and putting a lot of other resources into ESP spying, and they had information on us. I had another appointment at the Pentagon the following morning and so a bunch of us got together to talk about it."

"You had contact with spies?" Madison asked.

"They're all dead now."

"What kind of an answer is that?" Edwin Reese asked.

"Get back to the story!" Sam said.

"So, it turned out, the guys at the Pentagon had been following this stuff for a few years. They were watching all kinds of spoon benders; people who helped the FBI track down missing persons with their "ooo ᵒᵒᵒ ooo" Twilight Zone powers and all that. They sent me to Palo Alto to prove that his remote viewing stuff was a hoax. Which I was more than willing to do. But it turned out the science was solid. Very weird."

"The hound of heaven is upon you dear," Lulu sang.

"Been on me for 37 years then, and I have been shaking him off my leg."

The computer clock struck twelve, sounding like Big Ben. All

eyes turned toward the screen and Oran clicked the mouse a couple of times. They opened Outlook and Excel and Word and PowerPoint. Everything was working and everyone applauded.

"Thank you, Indian IT engineers!" Sam cheered, holding up his eggnog.

"I'll drink to that!" William Daniel chimed in.

Madison clicked the button on Don's new CD Player and Auld Lang Syn started twanging and everyone was singing, mostly off key, Lulu towering above the rest of the chaos.

Chapter 143: 2011

Madison opened the door to her house and a shaft of light from the west nearly blinded her. She shielded her eyes and looked down at the mahogany commode in her entry way. The old screen door squeaked shut behind her. This house which she had designed was not her. It was a witty accommodation, an adaptation of her life to Glen's.

And yet, this was how lives were. When they came together, everyone she knew gently gave away some part of themselves. She and Glen didn't do quite that. They each kept their visual character undiluted in this common motley space where they lived. Glen was fine with it: he got the gingerbread façade and the 9 pieces of Federalist furniture. She got the spaces. It tugged her heart to pieces sometimes: everything seemed so junked up, even when he agreed to put away sentimental gifts and trophies.

She dropped her keys and reached out to touch the pearl grey wall. This was her choice. The contrast between gold light and grey walls was her, and the long rays of sun reaching across the entire depth of the house was her. The way light and materials gave you peace and called you from one part of your life to another, from one activity to another. That was her.

And so was the ironic contrast between the gingerbread exterior and the seamlessly cool interior. That was her. She had kept the design a secret until the day of the unveiling. She really had to squabble—not only with the builders and workers, but with Glen – so that everyone would keep their mouths shut. She had kept the White-House style window treatments in the front hall: balloon draperies, gold silk with heavy tassels. This was odd, because of the weathered wood of the deep porches and the screen doors which squeaked when they closed.

On the day of the housewarming, on the first day of Spring in 2011, she had stood at the doorway as each of her guests walked in to discover it. As they passed the threshold, each one popped out with some sort of an astonished sound.

"Whup."

"Ntkhuhf."

"Ouhh!"

Gran had got it right away. And she laughed out loud.

"You are a funny architect Madison my dear. How can you be a funny architect? I absolutely love it!"

That was perhaps a lie too. Maybe Gran had seen it all before anyone, snuck in with her personal key and prepared her theatrical reaction. Madison felt goose bumps emerge on her chest and climb up her neck. She felt her jaw tighten and the tears rise in her eyes, but she wasn't going to cry those tears, not right now anyway.

Right now, knowing that tucked away in her clutch was that bank statement showing 10 years of interest on Gran's big check, Madison felt that the divide between her and Gran, but also her and her husband Glen was about to open even farther. And it might not be such a witty confrontation.

She shielded her eyes again and walked toward that light, through the entryway, through the living room to the window where she yanked on the roman blinds chain. The fabric slotted obediently into place.

She walked to the kitchen and though it was only five o'clock, she poured herself a glass of single malt whisky. She held it up to the gentler light of the southern window in the kitchen. She considered the amber splash it stretched across the marble worktop and then downed it. She slapped her clutch on the counter, snapped it open and slid out the envelope with the eleven-year-old Hallmark card and the information on the bank in Chattanooga where she had deposited it.

"So this is mine for bad times, huh Gran? And Papa Billy Dan's 300,000 too. Or maybe you thought I might split the loot with you?"

Envelope in one hand, clutch in the other, she followed the early evening light into the dining room. She poured herself another glass of whisky and walked forward into the light, pulling the tablecloth off the farmhouse table and letting it drag on the floor behind her. *It's 18th century. You have to keep it covered. We'll destroy it.* She had argued with him about this the last time. She threw the tablecloth over an armchair. The beauty of this table was the wood.

Sitting there now, Madison ran her hand over the table top. She opened her MacBook Air in front of her. She clicked on an excel file and started calculating the cost of a completely different life. The screen door closed behind her and Glen called from the mudroom:

"Sweetie pie are you here already? I thought you were working on a big project."

"I am." She slipped the bank statement back into her purse and saved her document. "I was just doing it in our lovely dining room."

Chapter 144: 2011

The Four Seasons, Atlanta

Lulu Bell sat in the first row in all her rococo glory: impressive jewels, French manicure, rings on the knuckles, fuchsia moiré suit, fuchsia shoes with black soles, black Dior clutch. She tried to tuck her Virginian Derby walking cane with the silver handle next to her, but it didn't work very well. These were not normal chairs, but transparent plastic things "in the style of Louis XV," someone said. Everything slipped about.

"That's my Grandbaby." She said it to no one in particular.

The middle aged, grey-suited woman seated next to Lulu looked up from her I-Phone, surprised to be addressed. Lulu looked over at her.

"She looks like Kate Middleton, don't you think?"

"Yeah, sort of. Different style. I like your grand-daughter's style better." She slid her thumb across the screen of her pink phone and it went dark

"Well of course."

Lulu felt off balance. Normally this sort of snobbishness from a New Yorker didn't do a thing to her. She didn't care. But today, she had this feeling of being disconnected from everything. Especially from Madison, her girl, the closest thing she ever had to a child. Madison's coolness this morning she had first taken as a strange brew of professionalism and speaker's nerves. Right now she was feeling the rift, a rift she had never felt in her life from anyone she wanted close to her. This felt like the divide she was always afraid would one day separate her from her William Daniel. A cold wind was blowing through that rift, and she didn't understand why.

She waved her gloved hand to Madison, and Madison smiled a tight smile and turned to the older man seated next to her, who stood and walked to the dais. On the screen behind them, it said 2011 Women in Architecture Conference, Atlanta Georgia, Madison Bell-Garth, New Generation Leadership Award.

Madison stood as the older man introduced her. She looked at Gran, who for the first time she could remember looked fragile and unsure of herself. *Well, you should be fragile and unsure of yourself.* Madison almost said the words out loud. Wait, said another internal voice. Wait and listen. Suddenly the room was applauding, and Madison Bell-Garth realized it was time to step forward. She now waited for the room to still their applause

"Thank you. Thank you. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. I think I see a second gentleman out there. Yes, there he is. I am honored to be invited to speak to you this afternoon as President and Creative Director of Bell-Garth Woolson in Huntsville Alabama. I've been asked to speak to you about young women and leadership in the world of architecture. Which is sort of odd, because leadership in architecture is mostly the affair of old men." The audience laughed. *"What woman, aside from the legendary Zara Hadid ever broke into their ranks? And my lord what incredibly talented old men they are. Think of the list: Frank Gehry, IM Pei, Peter Zumthor, Jean Nouvel. And we could go on and on. Incredible. So, my talk today is not about excluding our forefathers, but*

about hearing new voices, women's voices in architecture. There's our challenge."

Lulu's mind wandered to how proud William Daniel would have been of his little Madison. She had been so shy and intense until she was ten, and her Papa Billy Dan had just understood her, watched over her and encouraged her to very gradually emerge from her shell. Our Maddie, our own little thing. She seems so relaxed and confident today, thought Lulu.

"I'm lucky enough to be here, not because my name belongs in any list with these old guys, but because I opened an architecture agency, Bell-Garth, at the right place and the right time. I was in a town that desperately needed to start seeing itself differently, whose beautiful old homes sadly needed renovation…"

Lulu remembered very clearly how desperately Huntsville needed to break from its past, to break from the past of its natives and of its immigrants. In her mind's eye the old woman saw the grey Twickenham district house the night of the Halloween fire. Her old leg did a phantom slip next to her as she remembered slipping on a bit of an exploded jack-o'-lantern. All of the houses on the block looked nearly as mournful and haunted anyway. What a sight.

And there was that limp Nellie Maude in her dirty bathrobe, crying, sobbing and swearing on the sidewalk. "Everything is lost. It's all gone. My cats. My house, Y'all don't know." But obviously it wasn't all gone. The roof gone, ok. The northwestern corner burnt out. But she'd be able to nip in and get her stuff out, the important stuff. And there was Amos rubbing up against Nellie Maude's leg and Andy nursing his singed tail. Lulu wrapped Nellie Maude in a fire department blanket, put her arm around her and stood and watched the end of the Grant Slade legacy. The Bells would take care of her, it was a promise.

"… and I opened that firm at a time when the town had enough money to do what needed to be done."

Good Lord girl, this town has had money for years and years

and years! Lulu's mind raced. What changed was that power and permits were no longer doled out by the Fitzsimmons Haberdashery gang. Madison knew that. She and anyone else could see, in all transparency, not only who got what permit and how much they paid for it, but all the gory details. And this they knew not only about the present but about the past. It was all posted on internet for anyone to see.

Lulu felt a magnesium deficiency cramp seize her right foot. It suddenly got worse as she realized Madison most certainly knew who had owned her own property all through the years. She bent carefully over, pulled off her pretty shoe and pulled on her toes rather violently. The chic New Yorker shot her a glance. "Cramp" Lulu whispered.

"Huntsville Alabama in 2003, when I founded my company, was not Huntsville Alabama today. Then, in 2008 just before the bottom fell out of all of the markets, Bell-Garth was swallowed by a bigger fish. I have to tell you; I was very unhappy when it happened. But this turned out to be a stroke of luck too. First, because Woolson was a big name. That meant, in spite of the depression into which the market was swimming, Bell-Garth Woolson was able to continue to renovate 19th century homes in the area, and later, as I began to learn to lead my company, we were able to design more ambitious projects. There you go: you see it was positive for me as a young woman leader because finally this takeover put ***me*** *on the board of directors of a big firm. Now that was a place I never expected to find myself."*

Lulu wiggled her toes in her shoe.

"I ended up on the Board not because I was competing for power, but mechanically, because I was Bell-Garth. I have to tell you it did not feel lucky at first."

Lulu looked at Madison as she never had before. Not as her bright and chipper pseudo daughter who had bloomed in the back yard and learned to paint her toenails on the patio, but as a woman in her own right. And she was a woman of strong mind. No, she

was not to be fooled with. What a pride and a blessing. Lulu's cramp acted up again, but she just let it run its course. And what a series of knots Madison Bell-Garth must have in her own guts. Of course, thought Lulu. Madison had certainly sought to understand where the money in her kitchen garden came from with her full determination and her rigorous mind. Of course, she didn't understand anything; how Lulu wished for William Daniel's presence at that moment.

"The only woman on the board. How many women board members have we got in the room? Can I see your hands? There you go, quite a few. Well, I sat through so many of those meetings, after carefully presenting the projects I held dear, brain stuffed with figures, with arguments."

Lulu imagined the facts that Madison might see, as she might see them. Money was taken from Papa Billy Dan. The money was hidden from him. Secrets were kept. Underground contacts were made. Financial tricks were developed to maintain ownership of her house. Madison was not nervous or professionally cool, concluded Lulu. Madison was hopping mad.

"I prepared to field any criticism they might have of my various projects, and the board members would be silent, like this (a picture flashed on the board of an old guy with a totally indifferent face). *I'd end up hovering in the background, waiting for the old guys to decide what they wanted to do. Voting of course, but not exercising any pressure at all. Sometimes at first, I didn't even dare push my chair up to the table, you know? Has that ever happened to you? Yeah, a few of you."*

"So, I wasn't feeling lucky, and then I got lucky again. I met a Somatic coach who had been a ballet dancer for the Paris Opera, a certain Josette Lépine. Lots of leaders have coaches, but not many get up the nerve or have the dumb luck to find a Somatic Coach. Do you know what that is? Hand this lady a mike, would you?"

"It's a coach who teaches you to listen to what your body is telling you?"

"Yeah, that works," Madison responded. *" It's also a coach that teaches you how to use the intelligence of your body as an ally. It was very odd at first as you can imagine. We worked a lot on expressing my body's knowledge of leadership. I'll spare you the details. Then she taught me a simple trick: to stand around like a Super Hero in my free time."*

She pointed at the screen and up came pictures of Super Heroes on the PowerPoint: Batman, Superman, Superwoman, and finally Wonder Woman. Half the room laughed out loud.

"How many of you do that?" They laughed again.

"Well then, do you do great ape imitations in your free time?"

And up came a photo of a great ape in full stature. The laughter was weaker this time.

"I'm going to guess you can't quite tell where I am going with this. Does anyone in the room know about Josette Lépine? Do you know why she suggests playing superhero or great ape in your free time? Pass the mike over there."

The mike was passed to a woman who blurted out

"Testosterone and cortisol."

"That's it, just standing like that increases testosterone and lowers cortisol. The dominance and stress hormones. Leaders almost always have higher levels of the first and lower levels of the second. Leaders take up a lot of space. You want a leader who is not afraid to take up space right? But you also want one who doesn't stress out particularly easily. Saddam Hussein was dominant, but a bit too stressed out to be an ideal leader. Sorry if I appear to take that too lightly."

Photos of Maryse Bell, Nora Spencer, Tamara Spencer Bell and Lulu Bell flashed up on the screen.

"Now I come from a long line of strong Southern women. My great great great aunt Nora was an Alabama suffragette. My great-grandmother fought the elements and successfully dealt with

difficulties I am not sure I could physically survive. My Grandmother Lulu Bell is very strong too, as anyone can tell you. And helped me deal with my own natural shyness.

But before I met Josette Lépine, sitting in that boardroom I was folding myself up into the tiniest little origami package I could manage."

A photograph swept in to cover the photos of strong women in the Bell line. It was Madison, sitting with radically crossed arms and legs, knees pressed hard together. And the room laughed again.

"That's a real board room picture! No wonder they didn't take me seriously. How did I manage to lead my previous company you may ask? Well Josette says that was also mechanical, and you may be leading, as I was, on your laurels. I founded my company, I hired the staff, I developed all the early projects. My team gave me leadership status, there was no competition, and without thinking about it, I was taking up all the space I required to do what I needed to do. But that's not enough to survive in a boardroom full of great apes. They have a real hormonal edge on us.

There was a way out. Or in, if you prefer. A way ***into*** *being taken seriously in the boardroom when you were already doing your homework like a champ. Josette explained the science to me. Standing or sitting for just two continuous minutes in a dominant pose changes the hormone levels in your body, really significantly. 10-20%. I started "rehearsing" as Josette says. After several months of gorilla playing in my free time, my husband was sure I had gone nuts. But I hadn't. After 2-minute sessions of standing with my fists on my hips, and my thoracic cage thrown wide open every single time I was going to walk into that board room ... I changed. I started feeling comfortable to bring the best of what I was to the table. I started insisting the Board allow Bell-Garth Woolson to take on major projects. I refused their statements that women only have a "feeling" for interior spaces and intimate shapes. I pounced on them when they suggested that women don't have the logical and logistical facilities to deal with large institutions. This is ridiculous, I know. Hardly believable that in the twenty-first cen-*

tury, creative men in the most advanced cultures in the world would still think you can get away with entertaining ideas like that. Now if this were a room full of guys (sorry gentlemen) the room would be roaring in protest. 'We never said that!' Denial is not a river in Egypt gentlemen. And anyway, I'm in a room full of women. Do you ladies hear that sort of thing?"

The room clearly had heard such nonsense before.

"Amen" said Lulu. And she knew what she would say to that Madison Bell-Garth now, or pretty much anyway.

"I allowed myself to be openly critical of weak projects."

"Amen! Amen!" chimed in two other women.

"Some of the top execs at Woolson started to realize that if they continued adventurous, yes sexist, arguments during board meetings they were going to wake up wondering how it got so bloody down there on the floor." The room burst out in startled laughter.

"Figuratively. Of course. Because I'm only a girl."

The only one not laughing in the room by now was Lulu Bell.

"So my friends and colleagues, can I ask you all now to stand. Stand up. Go ahead. And now put your hands on your hips, and throw your shoulders back. How's that feel? Feel the testosterone rise? Feel the cortisol fall? It's a joyful surprise isn't it? The next time you have to go into a board room, do everything you normally do, get all the logistics, all the logic, all the great ideas lined up, and then go into the ladies room. Close the door of the stall, and do your super hero preparation. 2, 3, 4 minutes. You'll be taking over the world of American architecture in a heartbeat. Thank you very much."

Chapter 145: 1972 HPD

No one in the precinct knew it, but for the past week, Chief McPherson had been waiting for the other shoe to drop. He came into work on time, mostly ignored the crap from his staff, signed off on documents, and occasionally snuck down to the archives, rattling his brain to see how someone else might have learned that he had been at the site of that accident where that Negro Peterson boy had died. Hoping against hope that he would be able to prove that it was not his own flesh and blood who turned him in.

In the meantime, he let Philip Hawkes out of the tank. There were rumors of something going on between that boy and the Bells, but no one was talking directly to him about it. The promised contact from someone in the FBI had never materialized. So, when Mr. Hawkes's lawyer called to complain, Wally McPherson immediately agreed with him that a trespassing charge was not enough to keep a damned rich boy in the tank. He'd call Judge Hodgkins to get him released.

Sitting on a metal stool in the archives, McPherson was looking again at the only photo taken of the scene of the accident where James Peterson had died.

"Chief! We got someone here for you," Sal called down the steps.

McPherson's heart sank. Time had come.

"Who is it?"

"A lady and a liar. Young Hawke's attorney."

When MacPherson opened the door to the waiting room, he was stunned to see Nellie Maude Slade standing there all dressed up like she was going to church, in a blue suit and a clean white blouse and her hair as neat as a safety helmet. Stunned and then relieved. He almost said "So what is this, Halloween?" but glancing over at the lawyer he thought the better of it. Instead, he asked:

"What can I do for you?"

"Well, my client…"

"Nellie Maude Slade is your client now?" It was a real question.

"Yes. My client is here to file a complaint regarding wrongful acquisition of property."

"Mm. Hmm. What do you mean by that?"

"Mr. William Daniel Bell…"

"Mr. Bell?"

"Yes. Mr. William Daniel Bell…"

"He stole our property!" Nellie Maude blurted.

"Let me do the talking, Mrs. Slade."

"Miss Slade."

Shit, that was prim, McPherson thought to himself. *And here we are again with this lady saying that house belongs to her.* He had arrested her for breaking and entering into the same place. Bell had not pressed charges. Right now, Old Bell might regret that.

McPherson opened the doors that lead to back offices of the station, all the while controlling his desire to smile a big smile. This

was a distraction, he knew. This was a strategy to take the attention off of young master Hawkes who was in some kind of trouble, but it was a nice strategy. It would serve McPherson's purposes just as well. . If Bell had legal troubles, who the hell would believe his wife *and* his secretary, *both* in lawsuits against the Police Chief and his son? He'd look like a damn trouble maker for that negro Peterson thing.

McPherson opened the door to his personal office.

"Come right on in and sit down. Would you like a cup of coffee?" He didn't wait for them to answer: he just cracked open his door and gave a yell. "Sal! Y'all bring us some coffee and a deposition sheet!"

Chapter 146: 2011

Time

Lulu watched Madison step down the stairs from the stage on the far side of the room. People approached the young woman from the right and from the left, fairly cooing, Lulu thought. Madison spoke for a second to the gentleman she had been introduced by and then made her way over to Lulu's seat.

"I declare! I'm surprised no one asked you for an autograph, young miss," Lulu said as she was negotiating the move with her purse and her cane to stand up and feel the stability.

"Well."

"So where shall we go for lunch in this pathetic town?" Lulu asked.

"I'm not going to be able to join you Lulu. Let me walk you out."

"Ah."

"Let's meet for tea. About five in the lobby of your hotel? We're going to have to have a serious talk."

"A serious talk? Yes, I do think we need a serious talk Madison. I'll tell you what, let's make it coffee, not tea, and back home, not in this hotel. I'm going to need to get a driver to take me back this afternoon; I have been having a magnesium episode dear."

"Ok. Tomorrow at 9?"

Lulu looked over at her grandbaby's face: it was folded into a tight envelope. Yes that was it. She had folded herself into some sort of tight origami mask.

"9 will be fine. Walk me to the lobby?"

Chapter 147: 1972 HPD

McPherson was again in the archives, again sitting, folded into himself, on a cold step stool and concentrating on a file when the voice came out of nowhere.

"Hey there." The voice said, smooth and ripe.

"Well Scotty." The police chief stood to face that snot-nosed kid who used to hang around Fitzsimmons Brothers. He had turned into Mr. Somebody in his great grey raincoat and fedora.

"Well Mac."

"To what do I owe this honor?"

"Mind if I smoke?" The kid — Mac still thought of him as the kid — he lit up without waiting for an answer. "I think you know."

"Excuse me?"

"Come on Mac. We got international attention on this city. And this Klan stuff just keeps rearing its damned head. The world doesn't like that anymore."

Mac felt that icy point in the middle of his forehead again. He said nothing. What was there to say?

"The Governor would like you to come down to B'Ham and have a talk with him."

"With him?"

"And the Feds."

"And the Feds?"

"And the Feds."

Scotty leaned against the filing cabinets, took off his hat and blew a smoke ring. Mac lowered himself to sit back down on the footstool and held his forehead in his hands.

"Is it true that you refused to let Mrs. Naphtali Peterson file a complaint about the wrongful death of her son?"

"No. She came in; she didn't have any information. She was gonna come back."

"William Daniel Bell said you discouraged her. And that you covered up the attempted murder of his wife Lulu by your own son."

"She was in a tornado, hit by a door that blew through her window."

"Is it correct that you sought to implicate WDB in a fraudulent acquisition of a cabin in the Madison County woods?"

"I had a deposition from Nellie Maude Slade to that effect."

"Nellie Maude Slade?"

"Yes."

"Did she come get you or did you go get her?"

"What?"

"Right. Ok. Captain Nelson is upstairs right now. He's going to replace you for a few weeks. He's up from Anniston. Would you call in your people and explain to them that you are going on a professional trip please?"

Chapter 148: 2011 HPD

Statute of Limitations

When Eugene Penn actually stopped to think about the con that Benson and Hawkes inflicted on William Daniel Bell in 1972, he was in his car negotiating his way through traffic to the Huntsville Commissariat. A text message had notified him that a truck was turned over ahead and he slapped his siren on the roof. He almost scraped cars on his left and his right as he wended his way through the crush of honking automobiles. With each near miss, he set out a phase in the con game. The decision of two smart young men from rich families to carry out such a silly con. Turning dirt into silver. What brought them to that point? How they must have prepared it over months. Where they got the funds to put on the show they put on. The research they did and the coincidences that they quickly took advantage of. The help they got from … somewhere, but where?

Seeing that ambulances and police were already at the scene of the accident, Penn waived at his colleagues and pulled over the curb to pass the last car in the bundle, and he wondered how a man as reasonable, intelligent and successful as Bell could have been such a fool. How could this man have let a couple of kids take him

for a large chunk of his savings? As a curious man, Penn had a hard time letting this question dissolve into the hum of life.

But as a detective, water under the bridge, he wanted to say, 40 years past, statute of limitations and yadayada or not, it was all water under the bridge.

The door into the underground corridor screeched as he opened it. It seemed to Eugene that there might be an explanation. Perhaps it was because Bell represented a powerful figure to three different spheres that shaped Huntsville society: poverty, wealth and brains. And he was an intruder in each one of those communities as well. He was scapegoated, and like all good scapegoats, he participated in his own demise. It was his very intuition that he was the scapegoat—when his scientist buddies humiliated the kids—that finally made him wander off into the desert.

Eugene punched the button for the second floor of the Commissariat. The story had moved on. The con men had been judged 40 years ago and basically let off. And then there was a dead body that seemed connected to it all. And then two more dead bodies, even more bizarre than the first. But more conclusive.

"The facts are the facts Eugene. It was her money. She didn't use it." Bertine opened and shut the file folder over and over again.

"Stop doing that. It was not her money, but the family money. She didn't use it, but she deprived him of it anyway. That's against the law. And mostly, we've still got a body. Three bodies now. We do have bodies," Eugene said.

"We do. Do we have evidence, or even any reason at all to believe Lulu Bell might be involved in the two murders and the apparent suicide? Or in any murder? We have no transfer of funds anywhere in the last 11 years. No large or even largish checks either."

"What if she paid with gold ingots?"

"Nope. She cashed those in when he died. We have records of that. I mean, unless she kept one under a bed somewhere."

"It's not impossible."

"Ok, well to pay for three hit jobs like that, you'd need fifteen of them. At the very least. But alright, let's imagine that's possible. Have we got anything weird on her phone records?"

"No."

"But we do have that call from Nellie Maude to CNN Atlanta two days before she died and four days before Hawkes went missing and five days before his death. And we have a record of two return calls to her from his line the day of that first call. 9 minutes in total."

"Yep. I know. But it really gets my goomies that I don't quite understand what happened. Not quite. Something's missing. Something has been kept secret. I need a cigarette."

Penn stood on the broad steps to smoke, holding his leather jacket tight around his neck and watching the icy drizzle begin on West Side Square. First that strange old lady's body, and a murder investigation that focused on Hawkes. Who knew where that could have gone? Hawkes had become part of the mainstream media and his father had left him masses of money.

Now, two more dead bodies that Eugene was glad that Bertine had not seen. It was the sort of thing that can break a person to see a weird death like that.

CNN had announced that their anchorman Philip Hawkes was on an "unscheduled vacation". Later they "admitted" that he had disappeared and that his i.d. and jacket had shown up in the woods. Not exactly. CNN was apparently trying to do damage control. Pretty soon Sky News, the BBC and MSNBC would all be swarming around getting the facts straight, Fox was going to make a 24-7 circus out of it, and that was not going to be pretty for the American news giant.

Like one of those ritual murders you see on television programs, this one was shrouded in mystery. Or rather, it was shrouded in kudzu. Literally. Hawkes's body was on the bottom of it all, throat

slit. Kudzu vines had been pulled out of the woods to the clearing and wound in a long oval around the burial ground, many browned flowers, dead perhaps for months and still clinging to the plant. The kudzu, though, was still alive. On top of Hawkes, wound around him like a lover except for his head which had been blown back by the gun shot, was Trent Benson. And in a gesture of prepared tenderness, the two of them had been entwined in the growing kudzu.

How could it be anything but a murder/suicide. How could it be anything else? Especially since there was a letter in a zip lock bag from Benson saying that was what it was. The kudzu had obviously grown since the event. Perhaps Benson thought it would completely engulf them before they were found. The specifics on the letter and the bodies they would know when forensics finished with its job. Those two hairs in the plastic bag on his incident board had already proved to belong to Benson and Hawkes.

Enshrouded in kudzu in the middle of nobody's land. Penn was not going to hear a weirder story than theirs for a long time.

Chapter 149: 2011/1961

Get in

A taxi rolled up in front of the Four Seasons Atlanta, a lovely vintage 1957 yellow taxi, bright as a penny. The doorman held the car door open for Lulu Bell and looked back to see if she was coming along all right. She had paused in her shaky trajectory.

William Daniel looked back over his shoulder, his hand on the taxi door. Louella James stood at the curb, her hand on her veil. It was that singer again, he thought. She could feel his look on her. She basked in it a second.

"Are you getting in BD?" Georgy's voice sounded so young to Lulu, like it used to before 50 years of cigarettes.

"Are you okay? Are you getting in ma'am?"

Lulu was frozen, wide-eyed on the curb.

"I beg your pardon?" She began tapping forward on the sidewalk again. "Of course I'm getting in young man. Thank you for your kind patience."

Chapter 150: 2011/ 1973

The taxi ride from Atlanta to Huntsville was feeling sterile and depressing, the endless pale and geometrical suburbs rolling by behind the yellow and black window frame of the cab.

"Let's take this route, young man." She pointed to a country road.

"You sure that goes through?"

"Pretty sure. But y'all have a JPS don't you?"

"GPS, yeah."

"Ok. Use your technology."

"It's your nickel."

The scenery softened and the road bumped them along a bit. Then rose out of the corners of the earth the theatrical décor of kudzu infested woods.

"Japanese knotweed," she said out loud.

"Pardon me?"

"Japanese knotweed, the English call this stuff. Kudzu is a pret-

tier name, but knotweed is what it is."

"Ah."

As the silence and the rhythm of the shapes carried her along, William Daniel made his presence felt.

"If I'd allowed myself, Lulu, I would have flown from one erratic thought to another, pulled under by the great, kudzu-like tide of emotion. And then all would have been lost. As it was possible – for whatever reason I do not know – to float at a distance from our afflictions and to think of them as intricate knots to be untied with careful intuition and where possible, careful planning, we emerged, bit by bit, like lines of nubby silk from the mess of difficulties."

His voice rocked her and reassured her, but she was not able to talk in her turn.

"And even as we were pulling at and fingering our way through these improbable situations, with yet another part of my mind I was planning for those times when we would be able not to scrounge but to plant, not to seek the corner where the roof didn't leak, but to finish replacing all the slate shingles, not to keep just enough warmth around our lungs to stave off the Spanish flu, but to bake in the sun and breathe deep."

They were in bed. Lulu asked him "How do you remember all that stuff?"

He said he didn't remember all that stuff. He traced his finger along her body. She was silent.

Finally she said

"What does that mean?"

"It's like dead wood grown over with mushrooms, draped with forest mosses and blown over with rotten leaves. And then smothered in kudzu. That's memory. That's what memory is. I've ruminated way too much about the stuff I've seen. I'd remember it better if I hadn't given it a thought. But I can't manage to do that."

"It's all your imagination. It's not true everything we have said

about your Mama and Daddy and that house and your first boss and the company town?"

"You're sort of right. But through it, from deep within my imaginations, once in a while there's a clear voice, a bright eye. It kind of jars me. And I know that's real."

"So you are some sort of a carbuncled accumulation of thinking about what you don't remember anymore."

"Yep" He swung over on top of her again. "I think I'm going to carbuncle you. Right now."

She laughed.

The taxi driver cast a curious eye on the laughing old lady from his rearview mirror

Chapter 151: 2011/2000

There was a jolt in the road, and the old lady found herself, again, in another time, and she heard her own aging voice, a voice that had begun to tremble on its 76 years. Naphtali was solid back then, perhaps the richest, most solid version of herself.

"He was not greedy you know. He just had a problem." Lulu turned around, leaned back on the kitchen counter and looked squarely at Naphtali.

"A problem with *what*?"

"With money."

"He didn't have a problem with money, you did."

"What."

"You did. I know, Lulu, that you did."

"He was always thinking about gold."

"He was thinking about stability. And you were always thinking about sparkling things. Do not try to mess with me, Lulu. I am not your adoring granddaughter."

"I just took all that money and hid it."

Naphtali was drying the punchbowl from the New Year's party.

"What money?" she turned to Lulu who looked her steady in the eyes. Then she shook her head. "You hid it? You hid it?" She wagged her finger at Lulu as she looked out the window. "I don't want to know this. I don't want to know this. I don't want to know this."

"I hid it."

"Why the hell did you do that?"

"Right now, I couldn't tell you. At the time…"

"Oh great God in heaven."

"At the time I thought…"

"Thought was probably not the word."

"Probably not."

Chapter 152: 2011

Auld acquaintance

Madison was surprised to see Lulu open the door dressed entirely in black. It was not the black of mourning or the black of the sleek cocktail lounge singer, but a relaxed black: loose fitting trousers, black slippers, black silk blouse open on black silk shell. No rings or earrings, no flashy necklace.

"Hello Madison, come on in to the kitchen." Lulu turned her back and padded into the house, turning off the radio as she passed by it. Madison, a little off-balance, closed the door behind her.

"Sit. Coffee is served."

"Thank you, Lulu."

"So, how are you?"

Madison did not reply.

"Not feeling like small talk today, then?"

"Not really."

Lulu let the silence settle around them for a minute.

"I tried your thing."

"What thing?"

"The Wonder Woman thing. "

"Hmm." Madison blew the steam off her coffee cup.

"Three times." Lulu put cream and two lumps in her cup, stirred it and had a swig. "This morning as soon as I woke up. A little later, when I was thinking about what we needed to say to each other. And then just before you were supposed to show up. You're late, by the way."

"Yeah, well, I…"

"Forget it." Lulu warbled three notes of the Billy Holliday song: "*Don't explain*. It works you know. I'm feeling great."

"Are you."

Lulu pushed a tin of shortbread towards her granddaughter.

"Yes I am. So do y'all want to start or do you want me to start?"

"Hmm."

"Ok, me. Your project is weak and short sighted." She put her coffee cup down.

"What project?" The remark confused Madison.

"The project to cut yourself off from your family. From me."

The young woman covered her mouth with her right hand and looked down into her coffee cup. Then she spoke.

"It's not so much a project to cut you off, Lulu. It's a project to get you to tell me the truth." She spoke, shaking her head. "To get you to stop being, what? Devious? Maybe you've always been that way." She said all of this to the china cup.

The old woman put her feet firmly on the floor and felt the hardwood under her slippers. It was still stable. She was still strong.

"I don't blame you for feeling ashamed for speaking like that,

Madison Bell. Look at me."

Madison looked up.

"You know better than that."

"Do I?"

"You have an entire lifetime of experience knowing me. Devious. Good God."

"I don't know what I know about you Lulu."

The elderly woman registered that her granddaughter was no longer calling her Gran. She steadied herself on the counter.

"That's not quite right. What you don't know is how to make sense of the bits and pieces you have started to pick up about that money."

"It's a little more than bits and pieces Lulu. I know you created a shell company to buy my property in 1971"

"Shell company? Do you know what a shell company is Madison?"

"…and knew the person who scammed my Papa Billy Dan. And you planted the money there in postal bags."

"Now Madison, I'm going to think you had a hard time with your research. It didn't happen like that at all."

Lulu stood up and stretched in front of the sliding glass door, and looked at the grey sky and the pool. Then she turned and went to sit in her pearl grey armchair.

"Explanations. You want explanations. I'm not sure I can give you the explanations you want, but I can tell you the facts."

"Ok. The facts then."

Lulu responded in long sentences followed by periods of silence. Sometimes her voice was strong and clear, sometimes it quavered. Madison said nothing and Lulu did not look at her. As she spoke the old lady felt the life drain of out of her. As if these

words were all that had kept body and soul together for years.

"I had this thing about teaching him not to be so tied up with money. God what a messy idea that was."

Madison's anger was not quenched.

"So you put aside some more money for your favorite little grand-daughter."

"You were not alive."

"No? Do I know that? Anyway, I'm not sure I want to be her." She stood up and put her coffee cup on the table.

"I am not surprised to hear you say such a thing. But what surprises me is how angry I am to hear it. I thought I was prepared for it."

"Like you prepared every little twisting part of this." Madison looked out at the cold swimming pool and the flat back yard.

"How dare you speak to me like that? No — how dare you allow lies to creep in to all of the blank spots in your knowledge, Madison Bell? You need to go back to your somatic coach and get some help with your arrogance."

Lulu felt a little dizzy. She stopped to breathe deeply. Then she looked up at Madison, who was staring bitterly at the swimming pool.

"You know perfectly well that your understanding of what happened is very fragile. Even now, now that I've told you what I can, you don't ask me any questions. No, you cling to these little baubles of fact and to the nonsense explanations you invented to tie them together. Do you work like this in business too? A few elements of fact and a web of lies to string them all together? I hope not for your sake. I took back our money, it was our money, and then I didn't know what to do with it. What a mess. What a mistake. But I had my reasons to want to burn out of William Daniel Bell his strong attachment to money and his obsession with value."

"Gran." Madison felt weak and tired herself, and saw that Lulu was too old for this rage.

"Hush! Don't you 'Gran' me now. Don't you dare think I might steal from William Daniel. Don't you dare think I loved you more than him, that I would have been in cahoots with you at his expense. Don't you dare." Lulu's voice was low and trembling.

Chapter 153: 2011/1992

I close my eyes and I see him standing there, tall, thin. Straight as an arrow like his heart. On that cleared land, the spring green of the grass under his feet, tender, the image of a prairie as it stirs and awakens, still straw-colored at the edges, between the growing blades. And him, not mourning, not dreaming of the past, just being one last time in this spot. That silence that accompanied him everywhere, even when he spoke, filling the space all around him. The silence that afternoon, beaming to the sun. I dared not say anything. In fact, I didn't want to say anything. I just wanted to wait for him to do what he needed to do so we could get back in the Cadillac and drive away.

We had been suffering under pressure to sell HH Industries to a large contractor for the US army. There are no more small contractors, he had said on the way out in the car. He was tired. The US Army Contracting Service Ltd wanted to buy all of his knowledge of sound and of the production of unseen but felt things, radio waves and all that. They wanted to pay him a very large sum of money for it. A very large sum of money indeed.

He handed it over to someone he trusted instead. And now it was gone to him.

When I watched him standing there in his silence I realized – and I don't know how I had missed it before – that this company is what allowed him to continue to live in the woods. God had blessed and gifted him and the back woods had formed him into the man he was. He emerged from this scenery and he knew it. And now he was going. He was handing it over to Sam Burns. It didn't frighten me at the time but it should have, Madison Bell-Garth. It should have.

Until he stood in that meadow in silence, I was afraid that he was living in forgetfulness of what he had learned during the first 80 years of his life. That is, that the payoff for him was finally not greenbacks or gold ingots. The payoff for him, like for everyone else in the world, is what makes you feel like you've won.

I guess ever since those scientists and then those rich boys took him and took his pride, he felt he'd lost after all. Even after he had hogtied that Philip boy and turned him in. I held onto that money in a place he would never expect. I just felt terrible. I felt like I had joined in on the fun. I wondered every minute whether I ought not spill the beans, give him his cash back and be done with it. But so much water was under the bridge by that time. The lie was in the heart. If I told him and it destroyed his trust in me, if he lost confidence in his family… So I kept it for myself.

He didn't fade away you know. He remained active, but darkened. He had long telephone calls with Nancy Miller where she railed against the curse of programmed trading and the idiot golden boys and he said nothing much. Especially with the approach of the millennium. He listened to her. From time to time he said, you are right, you are right but what do you want to do?

He went back to see Sam Burns three times, but never was active on the board. And he visited Dr. Miller's lab a couple of times, did informal consulting for him. You would never believe how easily you can get into a top-secret lab at the Arsenal. Dr. Miller's team was building a huge acoustically white room which was, ironically, pitch black and bumpy.

And then, you were around, 13, 14 years old, hanging around being his best silent friend. He had affection for your cousins, but he just didn't love them. He would have said he did, but he had simple filial affection for them. You just stayed with him when he was thoughtful or blue and he said your presence helped him to understand things. *The damnedest things. Technical problems dissolve, lost things are found. My lucky charm.*

It was because of you he decided to set up the hothouse on that flattest piece of property within 60 miles of Huntsville Alabama. He wanted to teach you about growing things, and not to be afraid of nature. You and the wasps could get along just fine.

"And the snakes?" Madison had forgotten how furious she was.

"Snakes. Well Lord I don't remember what he said about snakes but he must have said something."

Chapter 154: 2011

Asleep under the marquee

By the time Madison left that morning, they were friends again. And yet, Madison had disappeared from Lulu's life in some sense. Or Lulu had disappeared from Madison's.

Madison heard the story; she knew the facts were the facts. But her affection was now distant or vague, or fuzzy ... or *something* anyway. Lulu picked up the coffee cups to put them on the kitchen sink. She wiped off the photograph of her husband with a warm circular motion.

"I should be devastated William Daniel, but I'm not. Will this be fixed in this life? I do not know."

Maybe, Lulu thought, maybe Madison would go see that Jake boy to talk about all this. She probably needed to talk to him about all of this.

Lulu left everything where it was in the kitchen and retreated into the private parts of the house, the rooms beyond the grey door with the spray of lavender hung on the knob. She went into the bathroom and carefully wiped her makeup off her face with a

refreshing towelette. She brushed her hair, removed her slippers, and went into her bedroom. Sleep would be good. She felt a need for it deep in her gut.

As she walked into the bedroom, she noticed that the oak art deco headboard carved with broad roses and pyramids looked like the marquee at the Old Lyric Theater. She'd never thought of that before. Her mother's voice arose within the room, clear as a bell, Y*ou can sleep in Lulu, as long as you make the bed neatly in the morning.* Sleep in, that would be good. She set her cane in the corner, peeled back the bedspread, and lay down, fully dressed on the clean sheets. She looked at the wall to her right, and the shadow of something crawled up it, trembled and startled her. She looked to the left, towards her window, and saw a single knot of kudzu climbing up the glass. How had the gardener missed that? She didn't care. She just did not care. She fell asleep almost immediately, and reached out her left hand over the void.

Chapter 155: 2011

The hand

And he took it. She felt it bright and firm and cool, so cool, smooth as baby's skin, full of life. She had so much to say to him, but it was very difficult. She fought to wake up out of her sleep and speak, but she couldn't manage it. Instead she watched the marquee lights from the headboard illuminate the room, and tremble with the shadow of the kudzu, far too bright and colorful for the space they were inhabiting.

Contents

PART 1 11

Huntspatch 11

Chapter 1: 2011 13

Chapter 2: 1959 21

Chapter 3: 1908-1915 27

Chapter 4: 2011 37

Chapter 5: 1959 39

Chapter 6: 1916-1917 45

Chapter 7: 2011 HPD 51

Chapter 8: 1961 61

Chapter 9: 1917 67

Chapter 10: 2000 75

Chapter 11: 1961 83

Chapter 12: 1918 89

Chapter 13: 2011 93

Chapter 14: 1962 97

Chapter 15: 1962; 1918-19 103

Chapter 16: 2011 109

Chapter 17: 1963 111

Chapter 18: 1920 113

Chapter 19: 2011 119

Chapter 20: 1963 121

Chapter 21: 1923 127

Chapter 22: 2011 HPD 129

Chapter 23: 1965 137

Chapter 24: 1923 145
Chapter 25: 2011 149
Chapter 26: 1924 155
Chapter 27: 2011 157
Chapter 28: 1966 161
Chapter 29: 1925 165
Chapter 30: 2011 HPD 171
Chapter 31: 1968 179
Chapter 32: 1927 183
Chapter 33: 1972 191
Chapter 34: 2011 193
Chapter 35: 1970 195
Chapter 36: 1928 199
Chapter 37: 2011 205
Chapter 38: 1971 211
Chapter 39: 1928 217
PART 2 223
What wasn't supposed to happen 223
Chapter 40: 2001 225
Chapter 41: 1971 231
Chapter 42: 1930 235
Chapter 43: 1972 239
Chapter 44: 2011 HPD 251
Chapter 45: 2001 257
Chapter 46: 1931 261
Chapter 47: 1971 265

Chapter 48: 2001 269
Chapter 49: 2011 275
Chapter 50: 1971 279
Chapter 51: 1933 285
Chapter 52: 2011 291
Chapter 53: 1971 295
Chapter 54: 1936 301
Chapter 55: 2011 305
Chapter 56: 1938 307
Chapter 57: 2011 313
Chapter 58: 1944 319
Chapter 59: 2011 HPD 323
Chapter 60: 1972 329
Chapter 61: 1944 333
Chapter 62: 2011 337
Chapter 63: 1973 341
Chapter 64: 1946 345
Chapter 65: 2011 347
Chapter 66: 1972 351
Chapter 67: 1947 355
Chapter 68: 2002 357
Chapter 69: 1972 363
Chapter 70: 1950 365
Chapter 71: 2011 369
Chapter 72: 1972 373
Chapter 73: 1951 377

Chapter 74: 2011 HPD 383
Chapter 75: 1972 393
Chapter 76: 1953 399
Chapter 77: 2011 403
Chapter 78: 1972 405
Chapter 79: 1957 409
Chapter 80: 2011 413
Chapter 81: 1972 417
Chapter 82: 1957 419
PART 3 425
The world that doesn't exist 425
Chapter 83: 2011 427
Chapter 84: 1972 431
Chapter 85: 2011 439
Chapter 86: 1987 443
Chapter 87: 1961 447
Chapter 88: 1971 453
Chapter 89: 1962 460
Chapter 90: 2011 HPD 463
Chapter 91: 1972 468
Chapter 92: 1963 472
Chapter 93: 1963 476
Chapter 94: 2011 478
Chapter 95: 1972 482
Chapter 96: 1965 488
Chapter 97: 2011 HPD 491

Chapter 98: 1972 495
Chapter 99: 1965 497
Chapter 100: 2011 503
Chapter 101: 1992 507
Chapter 102: 1972 513
Chapter 103: 2011 519
Chapter 104: 1992 523
Chapter 105: 1972 525
Chapter 106: 2005 527
Chapter 107: 1972 533
Chapter 108: 1969 535
Chapter 109: 2008 541
Chapter 110: 1972 548
Chapter 111: 1972 554
PART 4 557
Kudzu 557
Chapter 112: 2011 559
Chapter 113: 1972 571
Chapter 114: 2011 573
Chapter 115: 1972 575
Chapter 116: 2011 HPD 577
Chapter 117: 1972 581
Chapter 118: 2011 587
Chapter 119: 1972 593
Chapter 120: 2011 HPD 599
Chapter 121: 1972 603

Chapter 122: 2011 607
Chapter 123: 1972 611
Chapter 124: 2011 615
Chapter 125: 1972 621
Chapter 126: 1993 623
Chapter 127: 2011 625
Chapter 128: 1972 629
Chapter 129: 2011/1963 HPD 631
Chapter 130: 1972 641
Chapter 131: 2011 645
Chapter 132: 1972 647
Chapter 133: 2011 649
Chapter 134: 1972 653
Chapter 135: 2011 HPD 655
Chapter 136: 1972 665
Chapter 137: 2011/1972 667
Chapter 138: 1972 671
Chapter 139: 2011 673
Chapter 140: 2011 677
Chapter 141: 1972 HPD 681
Chapter 142: 1999-2000 685
Chapter 143: 2011 691
Chapter 144: 2011 695
Chapter 145: 1972 HPD 703
Chapter 146: 2011 707
Chapter 147: 1972 HPD 709

Chapter 148: 2011 HPD 711
Chapter 149: 2011/1961 715
Chapter 150: 2011/ 1973 717
Chapter 151: 2011/2000 721
Chapter 152: 2011 723
Chapter 153: 2011/1992 729
Chapter 154: 2011 733
Chapter 155: 2011 735
APPENDICES 745
Appendix 1: Time in the novel Kudzu. 747
Appendix 2: Race in the novel Kudzu. 755
Appendix 3: Too many characters 757
KEY Characters 765

APPENDICES

My husband and my brother, both accomplished writers, say no one reads appendices. I'm going to bet in this case they are wrong. I'm going to bet they are wrong because this book is so full of characters, that if I bought a print version of the novel, I would probably tear out several of the following pages and pin them to the wall in my study for reference purposes. And then, I am going to imagine that the way time moves in this novel is strange enough that a curious reader just might want to read the author's musings on time.

Appendix 1: Time in the novel Kudzu.

Pointillist or flowing time?

In conversations with friends, I have called ***Kudzu*** a pointillist novel, but that is not really accurate. I called it pointillist because it is a long and complicated story built up of many tiny moments.

But there is something about pointillist paintings that is static, fixing light as particles and ignoring their wave nature, if you'll excuse the brutish and pretentious metaphor. This story is not quite so static in my opinion. Maybe you will disagree.

And in fact, when I began writing *Kudzu*, I wasn't thinking about time at all, but about a mystery that was connected to the core of the life of an American man. As I was writing, his character broke through in some detail to me, and other characters manifested themselves as well, bringing their own stories with them.

And finally, towards the very end of the process, time emerged, almost as another person in the tale.

So in a certain sense yes, *Kudzu* is a novel about time. If you read it straight through from beginning to end, as the chapters are arranged in the book, a strange movement emerges, one that both

rolls wave-like and condenses into points of light. There I go again with my mid-twentieth century metaphors.

The story, as printed on the pages of the book, does not move forward in a linear way. It rolls forward and then back and then forward and then back further and then forward. And then it leaps far into the future again: 2011, 1959, 1915; 2011, 1961, 1917… It ebbs and flows and sometimes shifts direction. Chapters are points in time in the story. They mostly cover about an hour of experience, and average five pages of text. Yet the total span of time covered by the book is rather long: about a hundred years.

The chapters are so short that the reader is perhaps incited to pay close attention to what's happening, because… watch out… it's over already. The life you were in is finished before you have understood exactly what was happening. In parallel, as the reader is living these very short moments, s/he notices that they are undeniably related to other moments in the characters' lives, albeit in a somewhat mysterious way.

The chapters are so short and the blocks of time from chapter to chapter so distant from one another, that after the first thirty pages, some readers are tempted to read the whole story in order (if they can figure out exactly what that order is) to see if the narration holds water.

I believe this is a very human reflex: time just went by us so fast, and all these things that happened seemed both related to a linear series of events we have been witnessing and to other moments from before and throughout our lives. This just went by so quickly, that of course we want to go back and look at everything that happened again, to make sure we understood what was happening.

On the surface, as I've said, this is a novel about a Southern woman and her Granddaughter, or an American guy and his family. It's about their lives and failures and successes, and about how the way they exercised their will affects the people who come after them.

It's especially about William Daniel Bell for me, whose strong and solitary character I love. And it's about how those people look back in time to understand him and his actions and to understand their own lives.

And in fact, then, WTF is time?

Sometimes physicists think that the problem of time has been solved, or at least exhausted, by the fact that we can express it in mathematical terms. But that's an illusion: mathematics is not part of the physical universe, it is some sort of tool for describing the physical universe. Time ***seems to be*** part of the physical universe.

The fact is, we don't really know what time is (not to mention mathematics…). Does that surprise you? There is no "we", no matter what the level of expertise who "knows what time is." There are some wonderful mathematical/physical/philosophical ideas being thrown around, but no consensus. The more we study this facet of our world, the weirder the data grows. This doesn't stop people from theorizing on the subject ... obviously.

Saint Augustine and Blaise Pascal were both right to say we "use time" and we "experience time" but there is no good definition of the concept. All efforts to define time presuppose time.

Even so, twenty-first century philosophers generally cite two classical theories: one where time/space is a single block and all parts of it exist 'eternally'. Everything and every time is always already there. So, Einstein's clumsy condolence letter to a lady whose husband had died said, basically: "Think of it this way: George still exists but at another part of the space-time continuum that is not accessible to us." This is the time 'through which we pass'.

The second theory says that times past and future do not exist in any real way. Time is unidirectional and it is something that rolls forward and only fully exists at its forward edge. This is the time that 'passes through us'. The only time that exists is the one that is now. George is dead. He died at a time past that no longer exists in

any sense of the word.

But of course, if you think about it, past events do indeed continue to exist, in our very reaction to them in the present. Sigh. There is no easy way to speak about time. None at all.

Here's what we see of time in *Kudzu*

What counts in this book is how human beings relate to time, whatever they think that is. And that relationship is peculiar, following neither theory A nor theory B. On the scale of the human life, here, Bell's life, time rolls forward, and we are part of it. And while everyone knows perfectly well that you cannot go back in time, human beings frequently do try to make it go backwards.

Let me explain.

There is of course a sense in which we move through time. Or we think we move through it, because our memory of where we have been builds a "self" in which we live. This construct is both a present self and a trace of self that seems to have moved through time. That old part of the universe no longer exists except in our current memory of it. However, it does exist there, for that brief second when we hold it in our mind.

Imposing order on "flowing" time

The clarity of time past perhaps comes from our human work of imposing order on it. The question doesn't trouble the reader immediately, but it hopefully will trouble her after the first fifty pages or so: "Who is imposing order on all this time?" And then, perhaps "Who is the Bell everyone is talking about, and who or what is the Kudzu in the title of this book?" Is it William Daniel? Madison? Is it racism, Or Lulu? Or greed? Or Time?

In any case, the future, to the degree that it's out there, has not yet been processed by us, has not yet been ordered by our minds. But is the future is fully out there without our own input?

In order to keep moving along with this memory-created self in a given direction through time, in the direction we want to move, we impose order on the past, giving the past sharper and more familiar relief than it really had.

But we also eliminate or skew many details that might have allowed us to impose a different order on the past. It does matter very much that details have been misunderstood, or skewed, or completely forgotten. Or it does not matter at all. The effect of this misunderstanding is simply, and humbly, the change in direction that our lives (and the horizon of time) take.

Only when we have sedimented past experience, given it order and imposed meaning, can we make decisions about where we are heading. That is why, in a psychological sense, time rolls backwards: the consciousness of time moves backwards in the healthy gesture of seeking the deepest truth and imposing understanding of that truth. The consciousness of time then moves from the middle past back through an even more distant time, assuring a proper trajectory; and then and only then, when the foundations of our relationship to time and desire are solid, do we "allow" time to move forward into the future. We hope that that future will be what we expected. But of course it never is.

The "vain work" of moving through time

The Biblical term "the fullness of time" is interesting, as if there were a wave of great power, building through the past pushing forward into something new, as if it—time—were the very edge of our expanding universe. It turns out that's what Heraclitus thought. But that's a subject for another day.

That wave of great power would be "time itself": but we, in it, have a very different perspective. In a sense, time is part of us and we are part of what keeps it moving forward in given directions through the exercise of our wills. The exercise of our wills is the Avant Garde of the expanding universe.

Some of us twiddle our thumbs and let the world roll us forward;

we do not do our share of the work. (But who says we need to?) Madison's husband is like this. Others, more conscientious and less conscious, work to move things forward in the direction other people think the universe ought to go. Still others move things forward with great focus and energy in a very personal way.

All of us wake up one day and say to ourselves "Has all this work, this labor, this careful thinking brought us ***here***? How did we get ***here***?"

Why, we may wonder, why did we not listen to the preacher who said to us: "*Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do"?* Sometime in the ordered past, God said, "Look at what they are doing, what they would do, what they will do! For those beloved children [but why not the others?] I approve."

Now the preacher also said to us: *Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might.* Where we are going, there is no thought and no exercise of will and also no pleasure in exercising free will. (Whether we believe in God or not!)

Because what a joy is the exercise of our will on time, when we manage to win the game. When our actions in the present seem to bring us to a chosen situation in the emerging future, how happy we are, as if that success were ours.

The race is not to the swift, the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all. For man does not know his time. Like fish that are taken in an evil net, and like birds that are caught in a snare, so the children of man are snared.

So this universe whose boundaries we are pushing out through our efforts to impose our will on time is actually a fowler's net. We are all going to get caught up in it some day.

Some pockets of it feel lucky, and there the happy few can exercise free will. Others are unlucky and their souls are bound hand and foot throughout their lives on earth. If the unlucky few try to

push the boundaries, they will indeed get cut up by the net, and injured further.

And maybe like animals in a trap we are trying to get out of time. Maybe we are pushing our way through it as if we could escape it. But we cannot.

Or maybe we can. Death comes to all, and there, we stop moving the communal universe forward, we stop our miniscule efforts to push things in the direction we think is desirable. That time comes, and we are not quite there to see it.

But we are remembered by some who loved us, and we are perhaps part of their trajectory towards the light, as William Daniel is in Lulu's trajectory, as Lulu will be in Madison's, as Madison's will be in Jake's. And as you are a part of mine.

Appendix 2: Race in the novel Kudzu.

I know people who think I shouldn't even write this appendix. And others who think I have no right to author this book. There you go. I'm stuck in the middle of a real dilemma.

Who has the right to talk about race in America ?

Fact is, I'm white. You don't get much whiter. I'm so white my skin is wrinkly and I have nearly no eyelashes. I have a skinny little turned up nose. There you go. I'm also barely American. I've lived overseas for 40 years. What the hell do I know? What the hell gives me the right to talk about race in America? Nothing. But what am I going to do? Ignore it? Pretend everyone who had an effect on our American lives is white?

The American story has been tainted by racism and slavery from the beginning. The French and the British sold slaves, the colonies bought them. Shame indeed. Some got rich as Croesus on the backs of men, women and children slaves. And the legacy of slavery, and especially the objectivication of human beings is not finished.

Not all white Americans thought this was fine. Some gave a shit, even from the very beginning of America. One was Bell's an-

cestor, a writer of Norman French origin. Some tried to be part of a better world than that, throughout the history of the country. And the central times of this novel, between 1950 and 1972 were alive with both the civil rights movement and some of the most virulent racism in the history of the USA.

The nature of American culture over the years has been made very strong and very beautiful by the input of many African American, Asian, native American artists, writers and political figures. How can the author not acknowledge them?

So, the characters in this novel, when they are not barking mad, all stand in relation to this issue in one way or the other. That's the best I myself can do.

Appendix 3: Too many characters

There are two reasons that this book is full of characters, in fact, maybe three…

For one thing, "History", for this author, moves forward because masses of people move forward together in conflicting directions. History is the vector of the forces of those opposing movements.

And two …when we say masses of people move forward, those masses are made up of very distinct individuals who are often so conscious of their individuality that they don't even know what "masses" they are a part of.

Ok, and three, because the author loves people and tends to look at them in their fine detail and is always astonished by how magnificent and confused they (whoops, *we*) are.

In the following pages, I have tried to give you both a visual and a verbal list of characters. I hope you find it useful.

Kudzu 1992-2011

Madison Be

CEO BELL-
-WOOL

Granddaughte
Daniel

Step-granddaug

Jacob Pierce, M's Friend

Huntsville police department

HPD Detective Eugene Penn, Gene

HPD Sergeant Bertine Kobehi financial crime

HPD Officer Ewell Clardy

HPD Chief Bart Manville

The Petersons

Granny Naphtali (retired) PA to WDB

Mary Kobehi Bertine's Mom

The Bells: Other family

Gran Lulu WDB's 2nd wife

William Daniel aka Papa Billy Dan

Nelly Maude Slade LB's cousin

Dr. Martha Slade LB's cousin

Oran and Spencer Bell adult sons of WDB

Oran Bell adult Father of Madison

Bell-Garth

LL-GARTH
OLSON

hter of William
iel Bell

laughter of Lulu

Glen Garth
M's Husband

Friends of the Bells	The Con	Intelligence community
Linda Petteway EX friend of con men	Phillip Fawkes short con-man CNN journalist	Agent Hoshi CIA
Sam Burns husband LP, WDB's successor	Trent Benton aka Mr. Trenton Tall con man	Agent Corbett Don Miller's Cousin FBI
Nancy Miller stock broker wife of Don		Don Miller husband to Nancy DIA contractor
Don Miller husband to Nancy		

Kudzu 1959-1987

William I
Bell, Bill
CE(
HH Indu

Huntsville Public Figures

HPD Captain McPherson

Charles Fitzsimmons

Old man Fitsimmons

Scotty the car dealer

The Petersons

Naphtali Peterson

Edwin Reese Husband Naphtali

James † Son of Naphtali / Edwin Reese

Janinedaughter Naphtali & Edwin

Mary Daughter of Naphtali and Edwin Reese

Joe Torres Mary's husband

The Bells: Other Family

George Bell WDB's baby brother

Shelly Bell George's wife

Oran & Spencer Bell, "The Twins"

Little Madison Bell, dlaughter of Oran

Nelly Maude Slade LB's cousin

m Daniel
Billy Dan
CEO
ıdustries

Lulu Bell
WDB's second wife

Friends of the Bells	The Con	The Bells' outer circle
Nancy Miller stock broker	Phillip Fawkes short con man	Sam Burns
Don Miller husband to Nancy	Trent Benton tall con man	Matt Hoshi
Hubert Mead friend and ex Dir R&D HHI	Linda Petteway, friend of Trent	

Kudzu 1911-1958

The Slades	The Spencers	The James's	The B other fa
Dorothy Slade from Howelltown Grant's sister	Tamara	Granny James	Marys Bell WDB's m
Grant Slade owner of shack	Jimmy Baby Brother	Lulu's Mom Madge	Melvin I WDB's p
Gilllian Slade, Grant's Sister	Miss Spencer, Suffragette, Tamara's aunt and guardian	Little Lulu	WDB as boy: Billy
GarethSlade, Grant's Son		Teenaged Lulu	Baby brot WDB, Ge
Nelly Maude Slade, daughter of Gillian			Crèvec Distant re autho

Tamara Spencer Bell first wife

William I Bell at 4, at 3

m Daniel
t 4, at 17,
at 35

Oran & Spencer Bell, "The Twins" born 1952

e Bells
er family

The folks in town

HH Indus-tries

Others

Maryse Bell
B's mama

The Fitzsimmons Twins

Mr. Hunt

Young Naphtali

lvin Bell
B's papa

Mr.Fitzsimmons Banker

Miss Pritchard

Young Edwin Reese Peterson

as a little Billy Dan

Jacob Pierce Sr
Huntsville Times
Jake's father

Mr. Jefferson

brother to
B, Georgy

HPD officer, then Chief McPherson

evecoeur
nt relative
author

Below is the list of the most important characters that move this story forward. I have alphabetized them by their first names.

KEY Characters

First and foremost:

William Daniel Bell, Aka Billy Dan or Papa Billy Dan [WDB] Born 1911, died 2000. Husband of Lulu Bell and grandfather of Madison Bell-Garth.

Huntsville Alabama, Aka Huntspatch. This gently mocking nickname showed up the late 1950's when an unusually elite intellectual and international population started moving into the parochial town.

Kudzu: A miracle plant providing cheap forage for farm animals. According to some stories, it was part of a Japanese plot to destroy American agriculture in 1941. According to another, it arrived eighty one years before WWII, part of the Confederacy's efforts to shore up its economy during the Civil War.

Lulu Bell: Aka Louella James, Gran Lulu. Madison's grandmother – by marriage. She was a Jazz singer in her youth.

Madison Bell-Garth: Aka Maddie. CEO of an architecture studio, daughter of Oran Bell, Granddaughter of William Daniel and Tamara Bell, WDB's first wife (Lulu is Madison's step-grandmother).

Central characters

Bertine Torres Kobehi: Aka Bertine.Huntsville Police Department (HPD) Sergeant. New recruit in 2011. Just out of financial crime studies. Granddaughter of Naphtali Peterson, daughter of Mary Kobehi Peterson an African American and Joe Torres, an American Sephardic Jew

Eugene Penn: Aka Gene, Geney, or just Penn. 2011 HPD Detective. Gene is Jewish through his mother.

Linda Petteway: Owner of Petteway's restaurant. Associated with Philip and Trent in 1972, and with Sam Burns later.

Mary Kobehi Peterson: Youngest child of Naphtali Peterson, married to Joe Torres, Mother of Bertine Kobehi

Nancy Miller: William Daniel Bell's financial advisor and friend of Lulu. Wife of Don Miller

Naphtali Peterson William Daniel Bell's African American assistant and accountant; mother of Janine Peterson and Mary Kobehi Peterson and Grandmother of Bertine Kobehi

Nellie Maude Slade: Aka Nylene Slade. Granddaughter of Grant Slade who allowed the displaced Bell family to live on his land.. Taken care of by the Bells. Distant Cousin of Lulu

Philip Hawkes: Aka Mr. Philip Wilson. CNN Anchorman in 2011, student in the 1960s. One of two very young conmen in 1972.

Trent Benson: Aka Mr. Trenton, Ray Trent Smith. Professor in 2011, student in the 1960s. One of two very young conmen in 1972.

Wally McPherson: Aka Mac, Wally Mac. Chief of police in the 1960s and 70s and father of John McPherson, Lulu's assailant and lover in the 1960s

Secondary Characters

(Other characters whose names are mentioned in more than one chapter)

Bloody Bette: A Huntsville University professor, Graduate of Harvard, who killed three of her colleagues in a shooting spree

Colleen: Secretary at the police station [HPD] from 1971 to present

Don Miller: Husband of Nancy Miller. Physicist and defense contractor.

Edwin Reese Peterson: Naphtali's husband. Civil servant.

Emma Lupau: (husband Fritz) German refugee. Part of Christian resistance during WWII. She and Fritz are owners of a restaurant in Huntsville

Fitzsimmons' Brothers: a nineteenth century Haberdashery and General store that becomes a key place for people doing business in Huntsville in the 1930's. Owned by a string of people named Fitzsimmons, including Charles and his wife, Patricia

Fritz Lupau: (wife Emma) German refugee. Part of Christian resistance during WWII. He and Emma are owners of a restaurant in Huntsville

George Bell: Aka Georgy, William Daniel Bell's baby brother

Glen Garth: Madison's husband

Granny James: Lulu's grandmother. Would-be homeless person...

Grant Slade: Owner of the cabin in the woods of Madison County where the Bells move in 1917. Grandfather of Nellie Maude Slade

Herbert Hunt: Founder of HH Industries. Bell's first employer and mentor

Hubert Mead: Director of R&D at HHI and friend of Bell's

HHI : Herbert Hunt Industries; where William Daniel Bell has

worked all his life

Jake Pierce: Reporter at Huntsville Times. Madison's friend

James Peterson: Naphtali's son, dead in a car accident in 1959

Jana Penn: Eugene Penn's Jewish mother

Jo Tanner: a reporter for ***The Huntsville Times*** 1968-2010

John McPherson: Lulu's lover and assailant in the early 1960's

Joseph Torres: Aka Joe. Militant in the Civil rights movement. Sephardic Jew. Bertine Kobehi's dad

Madge James: Lulu's mother

Martha Slade: Cousin of Nellie Maude. A marriage counselor

Marvin Bell: Bell's Father

Maryse Bell: Bell's mother

Trish: Madison's secretary

Matt Hoshi: Biologist working for NASA 1972- present. Perhaps also working for the CIA.

Miss Pritchard: Assistant to Herbert Hunt from 1917-1947

Mr. Peabody: A character in the 1930's screwball comedy *Bringing up baby.*

Nora Spencer: Alabama suffragette. Bell's elementary school teacher. Tamara Bell's great aunt.

Oran Bell: Madison's father. Also see Oran and Spencer Bell

Oran and Spencer Bell: Aka "the twins", children of Tamara and William Daniel Bell.

Spencer Bell: Madison's uncle. Also see Oran and Spencer Bell

Patricia Fitzsimmons: aka Patricia, wife of Charles Fitzsimmons, 1972 owner of Fitzsimmons' Brothers Hardware

Bart Manville: Police chief HPD 2011

Sergeant Ewell Clardy: 2011 HPD

Sherry Bell: George Bell's wife

Tamara Spencer Bell: Bell's first wife, died in 1957

The Slade family: Grant, his daughter Gillian, and his son Gareth, his granddaughter Nellie Maude Slade, his great granddaughter (and cousin of Nellie Maude) Martha Slade

The Media: *The New York Times*, various radio shows, The Ed Sullivan Show, commercials, CNN, etc. A character all others interact with.

Sal Beaufort: Desk sergeant working for Chief Wally McPherson

Sam Burns: Mathematician. Eventually CEO of HHI. Lover, then husband of Linda Petteway, friend of William Daniel, Matt Hoshi, Don Miller.

Scotty: Owner of the Dodge dealership 1950-1980 and influential member of several clubs in Huntsville

Virginia Foster Durr: Alabama militant working to abolish the poll tax from the late thirties until it was abolished in the mid 1960's.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the many people who have given their time and their talents to help bring this book to term. There have been many. A good reader is hard to find. One of the hardest things to find, in fact, is a reader who can both hear your voice, and help you to make it clearer. My thanks go to Ron Norman, Scott Noblet, and Anneliese Guerin LeTendre, who have read this in its various states, and especially to my husband Pascal Noblet who gave it a serious and deep reading. It goes without saying that the faults and errors that remain in this novel are entirely my own.

I have done my best to pastiche rather than to paraphrase the voices of the many media, television and radio voices that people this book.

The names William Daniel and Billy Dan are the first names of the most brilliant and compassionate shrink I have ever known. He died some years ago, and many Huntsville men and women mourned his passing. His uprightness, intellectual finesse and kindness are at the heart of Bell's character, although his history is not, and stories from his life are not.

I would hope that Dr. Calhoun would have taken an interest in the way that human time passes in this book. Maybe where he is,

he understands better how all this works.

Dr. Calhoun and I talked alot about memory, as people do in shrinks' offices.

> *"It's like dead wood grown over with mushrooms, draped with forest mosses and blown over with rotten leaves. And then smothered in kudzu. That's memory. That's what memory is. I've ruminated way too much about the stuff I've seen. I'd remember it better if I hadn't given it a thought. But I can't manage to do that."*

The memory of Dr. Calhoun's fine person has continued to accompany me over the years, as I discovered and learned to accept who I was and what I wanted. So more than acknowledge his role in my life, it is with deep gratitude that I would like to dedicate this book to him.

Achevé d'imprimer au premier semestre 2025
par Roudenne Grafik à Guingamp (France)
pour le compte des éditions du Saudray

Dépôt légal au premier semestre 2025

A slow thriller

Over a period of 100 years, we see something creep into the American way of life that will eventually crawl into every corner and take root. It comes to a head during a ridiculous con-game played out in 1972 at a meeting in the peculiar town of Huntsville Alabama.

> *After his buddies the physicists left the room, William Daniel Bell sat looking at his thumbs. Everything in this meeting had happened too fast. The entire conversation just slipped through his fingers. Finally, he stood up, pulled back the curtain to the private dining room and smiled tightly to the young businessmen without looking at them: "I'll be in touch."*

Forty years later, William Daniel's granddaughter, Madison Bell-Garth, herself a whip-smart company president, finds postal bags full of dollar bills dating from the 1960's buried in the garden of her newly purchased home. She sets out to make sense of the mystery. Her best source of information about these times is her Gran Lulu, William Daniel Bell's second wife, and she, slowly but surely, leads Madison back to that private dining room.

Kudzu

Kathleen Brown-Noblet is an American writer who, long ago, was transplanted to France. She wrote her Ph.D. at University of California, Los Angeles on the French theater figure and poet Antonin Artaud and was selected to join Louise Glück's UCLA poetry workshop. She has published in small magazines and is the author of two volumes of poetry, *Western Elegies* and *Letters to George,* as well as an anthology of short stories, *Clothes* and the novel, *The Confidante*.

ISBN 978-2-9572699-4-5
24€